INTERSECTING IDENTITIES AND VIOLENCE IN MULTICULTURAL SPACES OF TABISH KHAIR'S FICTIONAL WORLD

Ph.D. Thesis

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RAMESH KUMAR MAHTHA

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I hereby certify that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled **INTERSECTING IDENTITIES AND VIOLENCE IN MULTICULTURAL SPACES OF TABISH KHAIR'S FICTIONAL WORLD** in the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY** and submitted in the **SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, Indian Institute of Technology Indore**, is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the time period from January 2020 to June 2025 under the supervision of Prof. Nirmala Menon, Professor, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Indore.

The matter presented in this thesis has not been submitted by me for the award of any other degree of this or any other institute.

Ramesh Kumar Mahtha

(RAMESH KUMAR MAHTHA)

This is to certify that the above statement made by the candidate is correct to the best of my/our knowledge.

Nirmala

(Prof. NIRMALA MENON)

RAMESH KUMAR MAHTHA has successfully given his Ph.D. Oral Examination held on **11th September 2025**.

Nirmala

(Prof. NIRMALA MENON)

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Ramesh Kumar Mahtha

To Family, Friends & Loved Ones

To the flowing Rivers and Immovable Mountains

To the Visible and the Invisible

Synopsis

Intersecting Identities and Violence in Multicultural Spaces of Tabish Khair's Fictional World

> Technologically, man has advanced incredibly, yet he remains as he has been for thousands of years, fighting, greedy, envious, burdened with great sorrow. –J. Krishnamurti

Introduction

Although Tabish Khair is categorised as a postcolonial author and diasporic Indian Muslim writer based in Denmark, his literary corpus and reflection on different social media platforms defy such categories (Dwivedi, 2013). Khair's fiction does not fit into the fixed genre of writing, making him a writer in a noman's land. His writing style traverses between literary and popular culture in postcolonial fiction, creating a canon of 'Popular postcolonial fiction.' This thesis focused on Tabish Khair's fiction critically interrogates the intricacies of intersecting identities within multicultural contexts, foregrounding themes of identity conflicts, systemic violence, and the emergence of new xenophobia. This study examines how Khair's narratives engage with identity conflicts— new xenophobia, narrativisation of identities in terms of glorification, thingification, and symbolic narrativisation, home and belongingness— exposing the systemic violence inherent in societies shaped by globalisation and postcolonial legacies. Employing critical frameworks of postcolonial and postmodern narrative strategies, the thesis explores Khair's nuanced representation of systemic racism, migration, identity, subalternity, power and poverty as forces perpetuating the "othering" of marginalised groups and fuelling xenophobic tendencies. Khair writes about small towns without reducing them to any inertia and stasis. Although writing in English, Khair writes

with a belief that all words cannot or need not be translated into English; he uses terms from colloquial Hindi or regional languages of India in his novels. As a creative writer, he sees some words make better sense in their original language.

Tabish Khair never limits his writing to the same genre, making his novels different in style and setting and narrating them from different perspectives. Khair is a sharp critic of harmful social elements. However, he is cognizant of the power of language, especially the language used in literature, and its shaping and adapting nature to connect with reality or to make a different reality. Khair's writing style is unusual, unchronological and a multi-dimensional narrative, while his complex characters keep steady progress, having intertextual references. There is a sense of correspondence between postcolonialism and postmodernism in Khair's novels, bridging the gap between different genres. Khair refuses "[t]o be enveloped within the rubric of diasporic author" as he intends to go beyond "West's dominant discourse" (Dwivedi, 2013, 12). Khair's writing diverges from purely postcolonial writings, which primarily talk about the West and the rest because Khair often uses multilingual and translational English. Khair's critique of glocal and cosmopolitan paradigms reveals the inherent contradictions in romanticising multiculturalism, particularly in contexts marked by socioeconomic disparities and cultural alienation. Through characters entangled in the intersections of fundamentalism, systemic inequality, and exclusion, Khair unravels the lived realities of those going through a fractured cultural hardship. His nuanced exploration of home and belongingness subverts traditional nationalist constructs, advocating for a reimagined sense of solidarity grounded in shared human vulnerability. Characterised by intertextuality and revisionist storytelling, Khair's narratives resist colonial and postcolonial hegemonies, offering alternative perspectives on history, identity, and memory through his intersectional

approach towards his writing, which this thesis puts in 'popular postcolonial fiction.'

Critical race theorists like Crenshaw (1991) and hooks (1984) developed the concept of intersectionality, which became a feminist topic for theorisation and research, becoming "[a] specific field, what Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) have called 'intersectional studies'" (Rodó-de-Zárate & Baylina, 2). Scholars have categorised the exploration of intersectional studies into three distinct approaches: application of the intersectional framework, discursive debates, and political interventions in intersectionality (Cho, Sumi et al., 2012, 785). Intersectional studies in literature can be analysed through theoretical analysis, narrative representation, and interdisciplinary methods, where literary language plays an instrumental role in the exploration. Intersectionality helps to understand how power works in different ways to analyse the complicated overlapping identities. Helma Lutz defines it as "[a] heuristic device or a method that is particularly helpful in detecting the overlapping and co-construction of visible and, at first sight, invisible strands of inequality" (Lutz 2001, 39). Focusing on the aspects of systemic violence— coming out of new xenophobia, the narrativisation of identities, and the illusion of home and belonging, this thesis proposes to advance the understanding of the intersectionality of identity and violence.

Postcolonial novels try to subvert the effects of colonial violence by providing a counterargument and anti-colonial discourse for imperialism's cultural and material domination, which later becomes a tool to analyse the ideological bases of colonial domination. Bill Ashcroft defines postcolonial literature as "[t]o cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day" (Ashcroft et al. 2002, 2). In the Indian subcontinent, postcolonial literature is mainly represented by a few celebrated writers such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, Shyam Selvadurai and a few others who make the

literary canon of Indian postcolonial literature. These canonical writers primarily focus on urban spaces, whereas there is a vast terrain of rural and subaltern spaces that are unexplored or are not reflected in their works. One of the reasons for this is the commodification of literature, which Graham Huggan calls "postcolonial exoticism" in *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001). Khair's novels challenge the Eurocentric notion of the fixed theory of postcolonial literature. His works bring a new perspective of hybridity and subalternity to the central discourses of postcolonial theory. Khair's self-reflexive criticism of novels redefines such terms as he argues regarding the condition of postcolonial studies: "It is this that often makes me frustrated even with much of acclaimed post-colonial literature, for very often this literature is only concerned with the bridge of West-and-the-Rest" (Verma 2008, 4). This discipline of Khair has developed an 'anti-binary approach that seeks to dismantle the east/west or north/south discourse' in the fast-changing global world.

Khair has created a fictional rural space, "Phansa", in Bihar near Gaya, to relocate the rural people and their cultures and how they live differently. Tabish Khair brings a new perspective to postcolonial Indian writing through his self-reflexive criticism and inclusive spaces of rural and subaltern. The postcolonial canon and its formation are interesting and, at the same time, challenging to define. Because this canon builds on the few selected celebrated writers and their works, these few writers dominate the whole postcolonial literary canon, defining postcolonial literature, whereas many other excellent writers and their works get no recognition, and they suffer in academia. Khair's novels bring a new trend in Indian IEL, emerging from both literary and popular Indian postcolonial tradition, developing a new Indian genre of fiction that this thesis terms 'popular postcolonial fiction.' Anjaria argues that there is a contrast of understanding between postcolonial and contemporary literature, particularly in Anglophone theory, as postcolonial theory has been a dominant lens in

studying Indian literature and culture for decades. Anjara says, "[w]hen scholars read new texts, they do so through the old lenses" (2019, 12), pointing out her frustration with how we need a new, fresh perspective of literature that is not corrupted by the literary market that seeks the voice of subaltern or marginalised.

Chetan Bhagat brought a new light and energy among India's youth as his novels are low-priced and easy to read, making the popular literature popular in the domain of IEL, also making Indian English indigenised English that not only counterparts Salman Rushdie's 'chutnification' but also brought an Indianness in the language which Indian people, particularly youth connect and speak regularly. Tabish Kahir does not compromise the standard of Indian English in his novels without losing the literary aesthetics, breaking the conventional writing styles of centre and periphery in postcolonial literature. Khair sees a need to go beyond this difference between literary and popular literature, between high and low literature, to improve the critical and intellectual standards, and we find this fusion of both the opposition into one style in his novels. Khair argues, "[t]he way to raise critical standards is to go beyond glib binaries like literary/pulp, high/low, art/popular, etc." (Srivastava and Sinha, 2021, 9). In his novels, Khair has depicted the other side, less visible in the eyes of metropolitan life of Indian societies focusing on the construction of *Dehati* (rustic) identities of people where he defines violence on the personal and intimate level. By exploring people's temporal and spatial consciousness, Khair targets marginalised, subalterns, and people experiencing poverty; his text circulates within the vast network of social, political, and cultural aspects and has material consequences for people suffering in Indian societies. Therefore, the dissertation's four main chapters explore different characteristics of Identity and violence in Khair's fictional works and how they affect people, analysing their temporal and spatial locations and representation. Khair also uses the intersectionality of language between

Hindi and English, and sometimes a smattering of regional colloquial languages in his novels, where the border is porous and has a glocal aspect for the readers. Khair also uses transcriptions and sometimes translates one language into another, providing an unusual and multicultural scene.

Background and Literature Review

Despite Khair's significant contributions to Indian English novels (IEN) and postcolonial thought, there are few scholarly and thematic engagements with Khair's fiction that remain limited. Among the few notable critical interventions in Khair's works are as follows. *Tabish Khair: Critical Perspectives* (2014), a volume edited by Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández and Om Prakash Dwivedi. This collection offers an array of thematic and theoretical aspects of research papers that critically examine Khair's novels alongside his theoretical writings. Another important earlier anthology in this volume is *Tabish Khair: A Critical Companion* (2013), also edited by Om Prakash Dwivedi, which comprises thirteen scholarly essays offering a multifaceted exploration of Khair's fiction and poetry. The collection is marked by its thematic and methodological diversity, where scholars in this volume engage with Khair's complex treatment of identity politics, migration, and de/construction of alterity, as well as Khair's historical re-imaginings of Partition, politics of memory, and violence. These two anthologies constitute foundational scholarly engagements with Khair's literary corpus and underscore his significance as a writer and thinker.

In addition, a few doctoral and master's theses have offered nuanced engagements with his fiction, extending scholarly understanding of his thematic preoccupations and theoretical underpinnings. María Eugenia Ossana's master's thesis, *"The West and Its Islamic 'Otherness': Irony Reversals in Tabish Khair's Just Another Jihadi Jane" (2017),* undertakes a critical examination of Islamic terrorism and its agents in Khair's novel

highlighting the ideological production of the Islamic 'Other' where Khair's fiction offers a subversive reading of radicalisation. Similarly, Tahura Tariq's doctoral dissertation from AMU, *"Postmodern Anxiety in Select Novels of Tabish Khair"* (2014), explores the manifestations of postmodern anxiety in Khair's narrative landscapes, situating Khair's fiction within a broader postmodern paradigm. Mustafa Büyükgebiz's thesis from Pamukkale University, *"Postcolonial Discontent in Tabish Khair's Selected Works"* (2019), explores the lingering effects of colonial and postcolonial ways of thinking by focusing on the themes of discontent, otherness, anarchy, religious and ethnic violence, emphasising Khair's intervention into the postcolonial discourse.

Recent research on Khair's works includes Syed Mustahsan Hashmi's doctoral thesis, *"Alienation and Diasporic Complex in the Works of Tabish Khair"* (Vinoba Bhave University, 2021), offers a critical exploration of Khair's understanding of diasporic consciousness, alienation, and the notion of 'otherness' in his novels through colonial and postcolonial discursive frameworks. Similarly, Mohd. Rafiq undertakes a thematic analysis of four of Khair's novels in "*The Thematic Study of the Selected Fictional Works of Tabish Khair*" (Reva University, 2019) that explores regionalism, nostalgia, diaspora, Partition, religious intolerance, racism, ethnicity, postmodern anxiety, and jihad. Arun Nath's thesis, *"The Fictional Narratives of Tabish Khair: A Study on Social Realism"* (Nagaland University, 2022), offers another important exploration of Khair's novels by locating Khair within the tradition of Indian social realism. Positioning him alongside social realists such as Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy, Nath argues that Khair emerges as a vital voice articulating the contradictions and injustices of contemporary Indian societies.

Overall, these studies on Khair's oeuvre underscore a growing academic interest, with most studies focusing on or engaging with

postcolonial and postmodern theories, diasporic subjectivity, and social critique. However, despite these thematic and theoretical underpinnings, there remains a critical lacuna in examining the intersectionality in Khair's fiction regarding how his own theoretical interventions pervade his representations of identity, violence, xenophobia and marginality. Earlier scholarship treats these aspects in isolation, lacking a rigorous intersectional framework synthesising Khair's theoretical intervention with his narrative strategies. Furthermore, Khair's dual role as both theorist and novelist has not been sufficiently explored to analyse how his fictional works actively perform and challenge theoretical constructs related to marginality, alterity, and the global postcolonial condition. The confluence of Khair's narrative practices with his theoretical insights into systemic violence, identity politics, and the narrativisation of identity in language has not been fully explored. Therefore, a more intersectional analysis, situating his fiction in the backdrop of postcolonial and postmodern theory, would offer a more comprehensive understanding of his contribution to contemporary IEF.

Tabish Khair falls/fits between the gap of literary fiction and popular fiction in postcolonial literature, where his identity and place of belonging justify him as a writer of intersectional identity. Khair's creative writing revolves around different parts of the world, but he always returns to his birthland, India. Contrary to the post-structuralist position, Khair affirms literature is "the experience of a 'reality'… which *also* exists outside language, as psychological, mental states, nature, relations, material facts, and so on, that can *only* be 'approached' or 'approximated' in language" (*Reading Literature Today*, 2011, 8). Insisting on "a mutual commerce between 'reality' and 'language'", Khair finds "some postmodernist positions to be untenable, if only because they seem to simplify matters in the name of complicating them" (2011, 150). As a radical author, Khair overturns many firmly established conceptions to improve and reframe contemporary literary theory. From Martin Heidegger to Saussure, it

became apparent that language is arbitrary; there is no privileged connection between it and reality. Therefore, no meaningful "real" world can exist outside language, textuality, or representation.

Khair is somewhat ambivalent about the language-centred philosophy. Khair concedes that the "notion of 'reality' is always constructed by language and so is partly 'fictional'"; he firmly rejects the notion that "language is the *only* reality" (*Babu Fictions* 2001, 6). He argues, "[l]iterature is written in language about that which cannot and will not be confined to language" (2011, 8), proposing a redefinition of literature: "Literature *qua* literature", in his view, is "that which always presses against the limits of language: in that sense, to read literature is to read also the gaps, silences, obstacles and noise in its language, in its narrative." "The best writers", he concludes, "make the most of not just what can be said but, above all, what cannot be said" (2011, 10-11). Borrowing Seamus Heaney's metaphor of "digging" in his poem "Digging", Khair calls reading "an act of digging" and the reader "an active thinker and interpreter" (2011, 15). Conceding that fiction differs from fact, a novel differs from sociology, history, or autobiography. Nevertheless, Khair asserts that there is "[a]n intricate relationship between facts and fiction, between sociology/history/autobiography and creative writing" (2011, 23).

Khair argues in *Babu Fictions* (2001) that "Babu fictions are about India and Indians, but their language is not always the language of India or Indians" (59-60), pointing out a division between Babus (the elite and higher class in India who is fluent in English) and Collies (illiterate and poor class of India who do not understand English) in India. Khair defines Babu fiction as "Modern novel can be seen as a genre growing out of certain material and symbolic factors and, moreover, a genre whose various manifestations were already possible within other (non-European) cultural formations as well" (2001, 41). Because Khair argues that IEN should be

read “against the fallacy of seeing the modern novel as a direct borrowing from the West” (41), which is mostly the case in the postcolonial lens. Khair points out two significant problems for the Indian English writer, a difficulty which Aijaz Ahmad also notes, are “the problem of dialogue and the problem of mapping” (2001, 99), questioning the very reproduction of authentic Indian dialogue in English. Khair argues, “Indian English is not an alien language and need not be evaluated in comparison to any other, real or grammatical, version of the English language” (2001, 100). Khair reiterates that “for the Babu writer, English remains a fully legitimate choice- for though s/he speaks other languages s/he reads and writes mostly in English” (125), warning further, “[b]ut to make Indian English aspire to the condition of, say, Caribbean or American English would be to alienate oneself from what actually exists in India and among Indians” (2001, 125).

Research Questions and Objectives

This thesis particularly focuses on the idea of how identity and violence intersect with each other in the multicultural spaces of Tabish Khair’s fiction. How can Tabish Khair’s fiction be categorised between popular and literary fiction in Indian postcolonial literature? The objectives of this thesis are: to analyse Tabish Khair’s intersectional identity as a writer in the genre of ‘popular postcolonial fiction.’ To analyse systemic violence by exploring Khair’s non-fictional work, *The New Xenophobia* (2016), compared with his novels *Night of Happiness* and *The Body by the Shore*. To analyse how language manifests systemic violence in Khair’s novels through the lenses of glorification, thingification, and symbolic narrativisation in his novels, *The Thing About Thugs* and *Jihadi Jane*. To analyse the concept of home and belongingness in Khair’s novels, how people suffer systemic violence by exploring third space in Khair’s novels, *The Bus Stopped* and *Filming: A Love Story* in comparison with Bhabha’s. Therefore, this thesis takes an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach towards analysing Khair’s selected fiction.

Research Methodology

The thesis explores key issues like intersectionality of identity and violence, belongingness and representation of home, systemic violence, xenophobia/ new xenophobia, and narrativisation of violence. The fictions under consideration—the primary resource of this study— are grouped around Khair's selected fiction; the rationale behind the choice is the selective narrative themes and textual data in Indian postcolonial studies. Thus, using a close reading of Khair's selected novels, the study examines the textual data, so the research methodology adopted is analytical and theoretical and uses qualitative analysis. Compared with his other works, the primary methodology is a close reading of Khair's selected fiction. His interviews, views played on record, his non-fictional writings, essays and news articles. In systemic violence, this thesis uses a comparative analysis of Zizek. The dissertation comprises six chapters: four main chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. This thesis also includes an interview with Tabish Khair based on his views on the post-pandemic world and his understanding of postcolonial studies and the fundamentalist language. The complete interview is enclosed in the appendix.

Chapter 1: *Introduction.* This chapter describes Tabish Khair's complete literary *oeuvre*, fictional works, writing styles, and theoretical aspects while exploring postcolonial literature and postcolonial literary canon, where Khair emerges as an in-between or hybrid IEL writer. As an intersectional and cosmopolitan writer, his works fall into the hybrid writings. Although categorized as a postcolonial diasporic author, his literary corpus and reflections on social media platforms defy such categories. Khair does not fit into the fixed genre of popular fiction or literary fiction in postcolonial literature, and his novels inhabit the noman's land. Khair's literary styles have evolved from traditional popular and literary fiction, taking an intersectional approach that this thesis puts into 'popular postcolonial fiction' to understand contemporary problems. His

critique of glocal and cosmopolitan paradigms subverts the traditional understanding of genre and theory, whereas his work provokes critical reflection on multiculturalism, intersectionality, and the transformative potential of fiction. Khair writes about small towns without reducing them to inertia and stasis, challenging the Eurocentric notion of the fixed theory. Khair's approach thus creates an 'anti-binary' and interventionist literature dismantling of the east/west or north/south discourse. It then examines how popular/genre/commercial/pulp fiction has been changing in the literary horizon, where many Indian writers' writing in the popular style has completely changed the perspective of fictional writing in India. By investigating the intersectionality of identity and violence, the study probes how Khair's voice matters in contemporary IEL.

Chapter 2: ***Embracing the Contrasts: Tabish Khair and Popular Postcolonial Fiction*** analyses Khair's *The Bus Stopped* (2004) and *Filming: A Love Story* (2007) through an intersectional approach to find out how his novels occupy a liminal space, situated in a "noman's land." Khair's fiction does not fit into the genre of either popular or literary fiction in Indian postcolonial fiction, challenging traditional genre classifications and reexamining conventional categorisations in the context of contemporary IEF. I argue that Khair inhabits a liminal space, putting him in the genre of "Popular postcolonial fiction." This chapter defines popular postcolonial fiction as "[A] genre of fiction that incorporates elements from both literary and popular traditions yet resists adherence to the conventions of either, occupying a liminal space beyond established generic boundaries." Khair writes about marginalised societies, people who are backwards and fated to go through misery, creating a local niche that resonates internationally. His novels have rural sensibility, new writing styles, and a peculiar rural aura, making them different from other contemporary Indian writers. Khair's literary corpus, influenced by postcolonial and postmodern literature, exemplifies a complex interplay between popular and literary fiction in postcolonial IEL, positioning him as

a distinctive voice within contemporary IEL. He transcends the rigid boundaries of genre classification, demonstrating a fluidity that allows a multifaceted exploration of themes and styles. Literary fiction in English, especially from the Indian subcontinent, has been represented in the canon of postcolonial literature by writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitabh Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and others. Popular or populist fiction also saw a contemporaneous rise during the same period, underlined by bestselling authors such as Chetan Bhagat, Amish Tripathi, Preeti Shenoy and others. So, where is the place of a writer like Tabish Khair? This chapter argues that Khair's novels exist in a noman's land between these two demarcated genres of postcolonial fiction (literary and popular).

However, Khair diverges from postmodernism's ontological scepticism, aiming instead to depict impoverished lives with a level of genuine concern that postmodernism often resists. His novels distinctly reflect the influences of both postcolonial and postmodern literature, where his approach balances a postmodern awareness, giving his works a distinctive voice that critiques and engages with postmodernist ideas. This chapter examines the place of Tabish Khair within this evolving literary landscape, focusing specifically on the writing styles and thematic concerns of his work within these broader debates, considering how his novels reflect and complicate the prevailing conventions of postcolonial fiction. Postcolonial and popular literature regarding Indian English authors are not exclusive, as they very often conflate. However, as a novelist, Khair's tenor does not fit neatly into the recognisable features of postcolonial literature, and his novels are uneasy alongside commercial or popular fiction. This uneasiness creates an in-between space between the postcolonial and the popular that Khair inhabits.

Chapter 3: ***Systemic Violence and New Xenophobia in Khair's Novels, Night of Happiness and The Body by the Shore*** analyses systemic violence in Khair's *Night of Happiness* (2018) and *The Body by the Shore*

(2022) through the lens of Khair's non-fictional book, *The New Xenophobia* and how it perpetrates systemic violence globally. It investigates the intersection of systemic violence with broader social tropes such as identity, power and xenophobia, as portrayed in Khair's novels. Systemic violence has emerged as a significant source of distress in the era of capitalism and high capitalism, where xenophobia has transformed into what Tabish Khair terms "new xenophobia", which becomes a ladder for people in power to get more capital and power by utilising the vulnerability of poor people. In today's world, there is a growing fear of indirect violence perpetrated by large systems, institutions, and the powerful elites rather than the direct violence inflicted by ordinary individuals because the perpetration of physical violence has significantly decreased over recent decades (Han & DeMarco, 2018; Viereck, 1995; Pinker, 2011; Khair, 2016). Systemic violence is perpetuated through various ways in the interplay of economic, social, and political structures —through economic deprivation, social alienation, and psychological trauma— that dominate and exploit individuals, creating a form of violence that is difficult to confront or resist, particularly in precarious circumstances.

Tabish Khair posits that old xenophobia transitions into new xenophobia within power structures where the unequal distribution of power, rather than mere fear of the unfamiliar, becomes the primary source of violence. In this framework, new xenophobia shifts the focus from irrational fear of strangers to the systemic inequities, capital and labour created by uneven economic conditions. While Khair's analysis provides valuable insight into how economic conditions foster new xenophobia and systemic violence, it remains primarily focused on the economic dimensions of these phenomena. The tropes of identity, power, and social inequality, which intersect with economic structures, also play a significant role in shaping the nature of new xenophobia and the violence it engenders. Khair's analysis leaves unexplored the vast terrain of social and political dynamics that amplify the systemic violence associated with it. Therefore,

this chapter is the extension and the diversion of Khair's assertion that new xenophobia predominantly prevails in First World countries, particularly in affluent welfare states (2016, 7). This study attempts to do an extensive reading of new xenophobia and its systemic violence, which is not confined only to highly capitalist societies but can manifest in various forms and contexts across different countries, including those in the Global South, particularly India, arguing that while high capitalism certainly contributes to the rise of new xenophobia, it is not the sole factor. A range of social tropes—such as religion, caste, race, and language—also play critical roles in perpetuating systemic violence through new xenophobia in the global South.

Chapter 4: ***Narrativisation of Violence in Khair's Novels: The Thing About Thugs and Jihadi Jane*** analyses how language can perpetrate systemic violence when we narrate it in different contexts by reading Khair's novels through lenses of glorification, thingification, and symbolic narrativisation. The chapter explores how language is inherently limited and incomplete in its ability to fully convey meaning through linguistic expressions (Khair, 2012). It highlights a critical aspect of language and its role as a symbol rather than a mere vehicle of direct and raw confrontation. One of the ways this violence manifests is through the trope of heroism or glorification in various societies that encourage individuals to perpetrate violence. Such violence often comes with an aesthetic appeal that masks inherent violence when intertwined with fundamental and radical narratives by normalising and valorising suffering. This narrative framework facilitates a form of hegemonic violence wherein individuals consent to their own suffering under the guise of religious or ideological duty, where the perpetrator simultaneously becomes a victim of their own violent actions. By exploring the complex relationship between violence and language, this chapter examines how language manifests violence through glorification, thingification/objectification, essentialisation, or symbolic narrativisation in Khair's novels, *The Thing About Thugs* and *Jihadi Jane*.

This exploration highlights the intersection between language and violence, revealing the profound impact of narrativisation on the manifestation of personal and collective suffering.

There is a kind of "Occidentalism" as the counter to Said's Orientalism (Zizek, 2008), which works as a template of Eastern narration to counter the Western discourse. Zizek's notion of "Occidentalism" offers a critical framework for understanding the Eastern narrativisation of the West as a means of opposing dominant Western discourses. This reverse essentialism, employed by those who perceive themselves as the victims of Western imperialism and cultural hegemony, functions as a template for constructing an oppositional identity. Focusing on the narrativisation of violence, this chapter explores how people, in the articulation of identity or self, can serve to justify or legitimise acts of violence because the act of narrating violence involves not only the representation of violent acts but also the cultural and discursive forces that sanction or condemn them, complicating the storytelling process in the legitimation of perpetuation. Through this lens, narratives of violence become potent tools for reinforcing or contesting the conditions under which violence is justified. This chapter concludes that literary tropes employed by the writer to narrate violence from imagination/symbolism can change into fact as we cannot deny its literal facticity, which can bear violence in some societies because of the literary imagination writers use (Chandra, 3). So, such truths coming from the fictional worlds need dismantling and deconstructing.

Chapter 5: ***Home and Belongingness: A Representation and Dislocation of Home in Khair's Novels, The Bus Stopped and Filming: A Love Story,*** examines the concepts of home, representation, dislocations and its non-belongingness, focusing on the discourses of Indian nationalism and national identity in Khair's novels, *The Bus Stopped* and *Filming: A Love Story*. The chapter begins by analysing how mobility and migration have fundamentally changed the conceptualisation of 'home' and its sense

of belongingness. As individuals move between multiple spatial, cultural, and political environments, home boundaries are redrawn, often resulting in fragmented or hybrid identities. This process complicates the idea of belonging, as a home becomes not only a place of origin or residence but also an emotional and symbolic space continually redefined by displacement, adaptation, and the negotiation of new social and cultural landscapes. Thus, the shifting dynamics of mobility and migration necessitate a rethinking of home, positioning it as an ever-evolving site of belonging responsive to the complexities of global flows and transnational exchanges. This chapter analyses how there is a massive gap between the lifestyles of rural and urban people in India. Khair says, "[h]ouses do not make homes" (2007, 367) because the concept of home varies according to the socio-economic conditions. How people live in a country is vital to a modern nation and its nationalism, as many poor people in India do not have a permanent home and constantly migrate from one place to another. They mostly make a temporary one-night stand (hut) for home, but unfortunately, their journey becomes a permanent home. That makes their existence neither inside nor outside society, creating a different kind of third space, but far more precarious than Bhabha's notion of third space.

The concept of third space in Khair's novels is far less empowering than Bhabha's in postcolonial studies. In Khair's novels, this chapter also analyses how the home is an illusion, not a permanent place, constantly changing like a dream and never getting concretised. While Bhabha's conceptualisation of borders operates within a national framework, Khair's portrayal of borders is more elusive and regionally specific. In the international context, movement is frequently a matter of choice, whereas in the intra-national context, particularly in India, it is an imposed necessity. Consequently, the third space in Khair's works presents a far more problematic life for those inhabiting it than Bhabha's postcolonial third space. This critical perspective underscores the limitations of Bhabha's framework when applied to the realities of regional displacement,

suggesting that the complexities of identity in Khair's narratives necessitate a revaluation of the constructs of hybridity and belonging within contemporary postcolonial discourse.

Chapter 6: *Conclusion*: The thesis concludes with a brief overview of the chapters, followed by research objectives and findings. This study enlarges the scope of IEF in terms of its genre and a lens to read fiction. This thesis establishes a new trajectory and style of contemporary IEL as Khair's fiction does not fit neatly in the literary or popular genres that this thesis term 'popular postcolonial fiction' in the lack of framework brings a fresh, distinctive voice. Through the textual analysis of the six primary texts, this thesis demonstrates the intersectionality of identity and violence in Khair's fiction. There is a need to study Khair as an intersectional writer and how Khair's works are relevant to the contemporary world. His work provokes critical reflection on multiculturalism, intersectionality, and the transformative potential of fiction in addressing systemic injustices through his remarkable ability to weave wit with gravity, offering critical insights into global and Indian societal structures. Khair's works show how IEL can be written globally without a postcolonial emblem by challenging the hegemonic narrative structures and interrogating the politics of race, religion, and migration. His innovative narrative techniques and intertextuality enrich his storytelling, which resonates across cultures. Khair's oeuvre is not merely reflective but transformative, marking him as a writer who will shape the contours of IEL for years to come. Khair emerges as a pivotal figure and a significant voice in IEL, skilfully bridging the realms of popular and literary fiction. It extends Khair's term "new xenophobia" and how it can perpetrate violence in the Global South, too, particularly India, by analysing his fictional works. In the appendix, my interview with Tabish Khair, entitled *"Literature and thinking about the world in the post-pandemic era: An interview with Tabish Khair*", reflects how he looks forward to seeing literature in the future.

Appendix: ***Literature and thinking about the world in the post-pandemic era: An interview with Tabish Khair*** indicates Khair's reflections on his works and how he looks forward to seeing literature in the future. The interview was conducted out of my interest in knowing about the real or fictional representation of Tabish Khair's literary works. Although the interview covered a few selected novels and scholarly works, particularly his last novel, *The Body by the Shore* (2022), understanding Khair's views on the post-pandemic world relating to identity, migration, and immigration in the postmodern and postcolonial consciousness. This interview tries to understand why Khair, as a postcolonial author, does not want the tag of a postcolonial writer and why he is pessimistic about the post-pandemic world. The interview has helped to understand how Khair sees the world in real and fictional and why he limits himself to certain writings, probing the importance of literature in this fundamentalist world and defining his position as a writer who does not follow any fixed genres or writing styles.

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2022 "Digital Labour in Social Media: A Study on Indian Academic Content in YouTube," at the Dharti 2022 Conference as part of the panel "Digital Labour and Data Justice in Indian Academia" on the conference theme The Digital Divides: Discontents, Debates and Discussions.

2023 "Life and Mobility: An Analysis of Transgressive Experience of Travel from Tabish Khair's Novels," at 3rd International Interdisciplinary Conference "Travelling, Transmission and Transgression" organised by In Mind Support.

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1. Workshop entitled "Mapping Digital Humanities Practices in/on India" by Jamia Milia University (online)

2. Workshop entitled “Digital Heritage Workshop” by Lancaster University & IIT Indore (16-31 March 2021) (online)
3. Workshop entitled, “International Workshop on DH: Theory and Praxis by Jamia Milia University & IIT Indore” (online)
4. “Summer School for Literary Studies & Digital Humanities” by Leiden University Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society, KU Leuven, held from 20-23 June 2022. (online).
5. “One-day Webinar on Covid -19: Perspective on the Post-Truth Scenario” organised by the Department of Humanities, IIT Roorkee (June 25, 2020)
6. “Theorising Humanities in the Times of Crises” organised by the Department of Humanities, IIT Roper (Sep 21, 2020)
7. “Two-Day International Webinar on Transformative Role of Language & Challenges” by Haldia Institute of Technology & Haldia School of Languages (Sep 16, 2020)
8. “Imagining Transnational Mobility of Students in the Post-COVID-19 Crises” organised by IIT Patna (Aug 01, 2020)
9. “Copyrights Law and Digital Libraries” organised by P N Panicker Foundation (Jul 13, 2020)

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

IEL- Indian English Literature

IEN- Indian English Novel

IEF- Indian English Fiction

ILF- Indian Literary Fiction

AMU- Aligarh Muslim University

Chapter 1

Introduction

"Art is a passion of the mind. And the imagination works best when it is most free" (Rushdie, 1991).

1.1 Khair as an Indian English Novelist

Who is a postcolonial writer, and why does a writer like Tabish Khair not want to call himself a postcolonial writer, although most of his works deal with postcoloniality? This question seeks literary and critical attention, as Khair does not want the 'feather of postcoloniality in his literary cap' (Mahtha & Menon 2025, 8). He is also critical of his recognition as a writer of diaspora. Tabish Khair, as an Indian English writer, falls into the hybrid writing between two significant genres in Indian English literature (IEL), Literary fiction (high-grown) and Popular fiction (commercial fiction); although distinct, they are market-driven and have specific sorts of readership. The alterity industry plays a significant role in the fate of such writers in different aspects of production and consumption. They get different discourse and visibility inter/nationally, where this industry barges into gain from the commodification of cultural distinctiveness. Khair stated that he writes "[f]or South Asians who read English and for the significant minority of western readers interested in going beyond the west's dominant discourses" (Khair 2005, cited in *Critical Perspective*, xi). The production and acceptance of canonicity and mainstream literature depend on writers' visibility, face, media publicity and affiliation with the publishing industry.

Khair keeps a firm hold on his writing without putting it into rigid blocks of postcolonialism or postmodernism. As a writer and cosmopolitan thinker, while straddling between the metropolises of Europe and India, he traces his identity to rural India, defining geographical and linguistic boundaries in this transnational and economically globalised world. In postcolonialism, Indian literature is not only perceived as a brand always

available for the Western gaze, but also this practice of othering and consumption works within India. In the second chapter, we will discuss Khair's different writing styles and techniques, his approach towards readers and his resistance to certain writings. Khair is a writer who came into academia after going through a lot with his personal and academic life, where he had to leave his home city and then his country to be who he is today.

This study explores intersectionality to frame the different interactions of identities in the context of systemic violence in Khair's fictional works. The term 'intersectionality' was "[p]ublicly coined by the black feminist and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s as a term to address the particular experiences of black women in the U.S. …" (Rodó-de-Zárate & Baylina, 1). Kimberlé Crenshaw's co-edited volume, *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness Across the Disciplines* (with Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and George Lipsitz), as well as Mary Romero's *Research Handbook on Intersectionality* provide different perspectives of intersectionality as their works significantly and critically situate the concept of intersectionality. Mary Romero points out the conceptual groundwork for intersectionality had already been laid down by earlier contributors from black feminists, researchers, and activists before Crenshaw formulated the term "intersectional" to uncover various overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination (Romero, 2023). In this thesis, I employ intersectionality as a critical lens to analyze the multiple intersecting identities that characters in Khair's fictional works negotiate within systemic structures of violence. This reading aligns with Kathy Davis's contention that "intersectionality as a theory goes far beyond its appearance as a 'buzzword'," instead offering generative frameworks for dialogue across diverse disciplinary approaches (Davis, 2008; Lutz, 2015: 39). As Cho, McCall, and Crenshaw (2012, 785) observe, scholarship on intersectionality may be understood along three

major trajectories: the application of intersectional frameworks in empirical research, theoretical and methodological debates concerning its conceptual scope, and political or activist interventions.

Intersectionality helps to understand how power works in different ways to analyse the complicated overlapping identities. So, if intersectionality is a way of thinking or analysing texts, then "[w]hat makes an analysis intersectional […]is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power" (Cho, Sumi, et al., 2012, 795). At the same time, Helma Lutz defines it as "[a] heuristic device or a method that is particularly helpful in detecting the overlapping and co-construction of visible and, at first sight, invisible strands of inequality" (Lutz 2001, 39). Introducing the term "doing intersectionality", Helma points out how people suffering from discrimination in the structures of race, class and sex, which primarily determine their identities, can "[c]reatively draw on various aspects of their multiple identities as a resource to gain control over their lives" (Lutz, 41). This observation suggests that people cannot always be victimised; in some instances, they can "[d]evelop strategies of resistance by drawing on multiple identities" (Lutz, 42). In relation to literary studies, intersectionality provides a valuable point by expanding the scope of literature by deploying it across theoretical analysis, narrative representation, and interdisciplinary engagements where literary form and language become central to understanding how power structures operate. Intersectionality, in this sense, helps to understand how power works in different ways to analyze the complicated overlapping categories of identity—such as race, class, gender, and diaspora—that shape subjectivities and social relations in multifaceted ways.

Kwame Anthony Appiah defines "[a]n identity is always articulated through concepts (and practices) made available to you by religion, society, school, and state, mediated by family, peers, friends" (2005, 20). Identity

can be the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks, and expressions that make a person (self-identity) or a social group. Identity or self is, at the same time, fluid and in a constant process of making and remaking. Identity should not be seen as inherent, but social constructions influence it in a cultural milieu. In *Muslim Modernities* (2008), Khair shows how he struggled and resolved this problem of intersectionality when he defined his multiple overlapping personal and cultural identities, "[M]uslim is not the only thing I can call myself" (Intro). Khair was educated in a Roman Catholic school in rural Bihar, where most of his friends were Hindus but were in a Muslim colony. He spent his childhood in a multicultural society with multiple languages and religions. However, he confronted many problems when he moved to Denmark to complete his PhD and continued to be an academician and a writer of importance. Khair faced prejudices that dogged his steps in Denmark, as people would ask him which religion he belonged to. Khair would try to reply that "[a]ctually my parents are practising Muslim, or that I come from a Muslim background" (Intro.) because that was the only honest answer he had. However, within a few years, he realised how his identity creates panic and awkward situations for many people. So, he replies, "I am Muslim" (Intro.). Now, this realisation comes only when he suffers his acceptance of intersectionality, as he mentioned, "[t]he answer 'I am Muslim' evokes strange reactions. Some people don't care and some people are taken aback but recover. But some cut me dead." He understands that they would not have done so if he had indicated that he was not religious or that he was basically critical or ashamed of his Muslim inheritance (Intro). It took him some time, but Khair accepted that "I am not ashamed of being Muslim or Indian or coloured or anything else that has descended on me through time and as such carries with it the complexities—neither entirely good nor entirely bad— of history" (Intro).

Intersectionality of identity complicates things by multiplying or overlapping different social categories such as caste, class, gender, religion,

status and so on; this complication makes people experience multiple forms of suffering or discrimination. This study intends to analyse the intersection of identity, violence, power, belonging, and xenophobia/new xenophobia in the selected novels of Tabish Khair against the backdrop of Postcolonial and Postmodern Studies. Focusing on the dimensions of identity— in terms of the intersectional identity of Tabish Khair as an Indian English novelist, how complex identity in terms of home and belonging trigger systemic violence, how narrating different identities leads to violence, how xenophobia has changed into new xenophobia perpetrating systemic violence— are some of the themes that this thesis intends to analyse by exploring Tabish Khair's selected novels. Therefore, the dissertation's four main chapters explore different characteristics of Identity and violence in Khair's fictional works and how they affect people, analysing their temporal and spatial locations and representation.

1.2 Studies on Identity and Violence

As human life is mobile, so is a socio-cultural framework that always works dynamically and not statically, so the shift in identity and violence is evident. Georges Sorel remarks, in his seminal work *Reflections on Violence* (1908), that "[t]he problems of violence still remain very obscure" (49), and it is as true in this contemporary society as it was then. We have been living in a world where most people do not feel comfortable and safe because so-called human society is saturated with all sorts of violence both inwardly and outwardly, as well as politically and individually. Violence has become a regular thing today because of the constant information from the media about crimes and atrocities which are happening around the world. Byung-Chul Han, in the introduction of his book, *Topology of Violence,* writes, "There are things that don't disappear. Violence is one of them. … Violence is simply protean" (Han, B.-C., & DeMarco, A., 2018, vii). In the introduction of his seminal work, *Violence* (2008), Slavoj Zizek presents violence takes three forms— "subjective (crime, terror); objective (racism, hate-speech, discrimination); and

systemic (the catastrophic effects of economic and political system)— and often one form of violence blunts our ability to see the others raising complicated questions" (iii). Zizek raises important questions, like whether the advent of capitalism and civilisation causes more violence than it prevents. Beginning with these and other equally contemplative questions, Zizek discusses the inherent violence of globalization, capitalism, fundamentalism, and language, which is relevant for this study as this thesis proposes to add more insights on intersecting identities and systemic violence which can be seen by relating social tropes like identity, belonging, power, xenophobia/new xenophobia.

Hannah Arendt argues in her book *On Violence* (1970) that "[v]iolence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power" (35), pointing out that violence depends on its instrumental character as it needs implementation. Meanwhile, Fanon, fascinated by the psychological effects of colonialism, believes that violence is a form of self-assertion and a 'cleansing force' (51). Violence, as a phenomenon, has become increasingly complex in the context of its location and cultural manifestations, especially in contemporary society, where its unpredictable nature defies easy categorization as Arendt observes that "[v]iolence harbours within itself an additional element of arbitrariness" (4), highlighting the inherent unpredictability of violent acts. Many scholars and writers of violence studies have analysed its different types, reasons, roles, and effects on our society. However, in this postmodern and postcolonial era, violence has changed its role and nature, and we need to look at it from different perspectives to understand its hidden form (Han, B.-C., & DeMarco, A., 2018; Sen, 2006; Maalouf, 2012; Chandra, 2009; Zizek, 2008; Khair, 2016; and Pinker, 2011).

In today's world, there is a growing fear of indirect violence or systemic violence perpetrated by large systems, institutions, and the powerful elites rather than the direct violence or physical violence inflicted by ordinary individuals because the perpetration of physical violence has

significantly decreased over recent decades (Han & DeMarco, 2018; Viereck, 1995; Pinker, 2011; Khair, 2016). However, the perpetuation of systemic and epistemic violence has intensified in diverse and often subtle forms, making it increasingly difficult to identify, articulate, and address. This form of violence is arguably more pervasive and insidious, as it operates through systemic structures that oppress and exploit vulnerable people in society. Such violence manifests in various ways—through economic deprivation, social alienation, and psychological trauma—creating a form of harm that is difficult to confront or resist; as Byung Chul-Han observes, systemic violence has "[s]hifted from the visible to the invisible, from the direct to the discreet, from the physical to the psychic, from the martial to the medial, and from the frontal to the viral" (2018, vii). This thesis intends to understand the broader aspect of Khair's works, which relates to hidden forms of systemic violence in a multicultural society.

As this thesis intends to analyse the intersectionality between identity and violence, this section examines the conflicts and tensions that identity creates when seen or narrated differently against the backdrop of xenophobia and power. Amartya Sen, in his seminal work, *Identity and Violence* (2006), argues, "[a] sense of identity can be a source not merely of pride and joy but also of strength and confidence. […] And yet identity can kill—and kill with abandon" (1). This paradoxical statement has much plausibility when we look around the world, where most of society is falling apart because of widespread violence. The identity that gives us a sense of credibility in our society, the same identity can be a dangerous thing for us when we misperceive and misinterpret it. Sen says, "Civilizational or religious partitioning of the world population yields a 'solitarist' approach to human identity, […]. A solitarist approach can be a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world" (2006, xii). So, the question of how violence works with identity can be answered by the fact that we enter violent clashes with each other only when our sense of identity is reduced to a single thing or single identity through a 'solitarist' approach.

It leads to social and geographical discrimination because everyone has multiple identities, and India's diverse regions make it more complex. We are all a conglomeration of different identities. We are so multi-faceted that when we reduce ourselves to a single identity, we do violence to ourselves. Human beings associating only with a singular identity in terms of religion, language, culture, and ethnicity are divisive and confrontational.

Amin Maalouf supports this argument in his book *In the Name of Identity* (2000), where he analyses how 'identity' has multiple allegiances or 'belongings' and when these allegiances are "pressed" and "ordered" to one single affiliation, we indulge in violence. He writes-

> I talk of their being "pressed" and "ordered"—but by whom?' and he converses with himself, 'Not just by fanatics and xenophobes of all kinds, but also by you and me, by each one of us. And we do so precisely because of habits of thought and expression deeply rooted in us all; because of narrow, exclusive, bigoted, simplistic attitude that reduces identity in all its aspects to one single affiliation, and one that is proclaimed in anger (Maalouf, 5).

There is a deep chasm between the 'self' and 'other' in the postcolonial discourses because the 'self' always views the 'other' as nothing but a threat to their existential identity. If there is a 'self', there has to be an 'Other' to recognise the existence of the 'self', which Levinas considers to be 'the ethical relationship between 'self' and 'other'. Tabish Khair has taken these issues in his novels to show the present world where people are saturated with violence based on identity or self or the importance of face value, power, language and capitalism. Giti Chandra, in her book *Narrating Violence, Constructing Collective Identities* (2008), discusses that we narrate our bodies metaphorically, and violence materializes or literalizes that metaphor. Therefore, narrativization of identity can be an instigator of violence. She wants to say, 'how we narrate our body allows certain kinds of violence to be perpetrated upon us'. Most of the atrocity and barbarity seen in the contemporary world is based on the illusion of a singular and

one-dimensional sense of identity; as Zizek articulates, violence is "indeed a radical perversion of humanity" (2008, 61).

1.3 Tabish Khair's Background

Tabish Khair, a novelist, celebrated author, poet, critic, and a Bihari expat with a diverse body of work based in Denmark, is born in Ranchi (1966) and brought up in Gaya, a rural metropolitan city in Bihar. Khair is educated in a small town and followed his passion for studying literature against his family's wish to pursue medicine as his family tradition. Khair is a multilingual author, but he writes primarily in English as he grew up speaking three languages: Urdu, Hindi, and English and later learned many more. His interest was more in the arts than science, leading him to complete his Bachelor of Arts at Gaya College and his Master's in English from Magadh University. This led to a foundation for his deep passion for the humanities and literature. Khair's early critical thinking about society and indulging in social and political causes dragged him into media reporting; he worked as a district reporter in Patna for *The Times of India*. Khair has been a revolutionary writer against the petty customs and dogmas of Indian society as he never restricted himself, being a Muslim minority, in his social and religious constrictions; he writes in *Muslim Modernities*, "I felt I had to write partly as a Muslim. Because, as the reader will discover, 'Muslim' is not the only thing I can call myself" (Verma 2008, Intro.). Soon, however, because of his liberal and social ideas, which created trouble for him and his family, as local fundamentalists did not like his ways, he moved to Delhi and continued his work as a staff reporter for *The Times of India*.

However, Khair's passion for literature and his love for poetry in English and Urdu once again pulled him from reporting. After working nearly four years as a reporter, he decides to move to Copenhagen to complete his PhD, where he, as an immigrant, has to do many menial jobs to survive. After many hardships, Khair completed his PhD in 2000 and later moved to Aarhus for better academic opportunities. His PhD thesis

was later published as *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels* by Oxford University Press in 2001. Khair's writing oeuvre spans more than twenty years in India and Denmark, and he brings his candid observations and sharp critiques of India and other societies of the world. Being a poet and novelist, Khair has a very keen perception of social problems, as there is a saying in Hindi, "*Jaha na jaye ravi waha jaye kavi*" meaning 'a poet reaches farther than the sun', to inquire and, if needed, provide chiding for the same.

Khair experiments with different genres (Novel, Poetry, Non-fiction, and Travelogue) and has written eight novels, namely *An Angel in Pyjamas* (1996), *The Bus Stopped* (2004), *Filming: A Love Story* (2007), *The Thing About Thugs* (2010), *How to Fight Islamist Terror from Missionary Position* (2012), *Jihadi Jane* (2016), *Night of Happiness* (2018), and *The Body by the Shore* (2022). His six poetry collections include *My World* (1991), published by Rupa & Co., *A Reporter's Diary* (1993), *The Book of Heroes: A Collection of Light Verse and Much Worse* (1995), *Birds of North Europe* (1995), *Where Parallel Lines Meet* (2000), *Man of Glass* (2010), *Quarantined Sonnets: Sex, Money and Shakespeare* (2020), and His six non-fictional works include *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Indian English Novels* (2001), *Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing* (2006), *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (2009), *Reading Literature Today* (2011), *The New Xenophobia* (2016), and *Literature Against Fundamentalism* (2024). Khair has also published one storybook for children, *The Glum Peacock* (Zubaan Books, 2008). Khair has coedited several other books and journals. Tabish Khair has contributed immense value to IEL by portraying the current tensions in our society in different writing styles and literary techniques through his works, particularly novels, which are concerned with social issues.

Khair has begged for many National and International prizes and fellowships. His books include "*Babu Fictions*" and "*The Bus Stopped*",

which were shortlisted for the Encore Award (UK) and "*The Thing About Thugs*" has been shortlisted for several prizes, including the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and the Man Asian Literary Prize (Hong Kong). Khair's *The Thing About Thugs* and *How to Fight Islamist Terror from Missionary Position* have also been shortlisted for India's main book prize offered by the National Academy of Arts, the Sahitya Akademi Award. Furthermore, his novel *Night of Happiness* (2018) won the AK Singh Memorial Award for Best Fiction. His poem "*Birds of North Europe*" won the First Prize in the Sixth The Poetry Society (India) Competition in 1995. He received an honorary fellowship in creative writing from the Baptist University of Hong Kong. Khair also habitually writes daily columns and newsletters in various newspapers and magazines. He is an Associate Professor in English at the Department English, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University, Denmark. He has also been awarded guest professorships or honorary fellowships at Delhi University (India), Leverhulme Guest Professor at Leeds University (UK), York University (UK), a fellow of Cambridge University (UK), and others.

Khair's first collection of poems, *My World,* was a literary success which inspired Khair to write seriously by indulging in a writing career as it was praised by prominent poets and critics like Keki N Daruwalla, Adil Jussawalla, Vilas Sarang and Shiv K Kumar (Dwivedi 2013, 10). Khair's first novel, *An Angel in Pyjamas,* published by Harper Collins, a less popular work of Khair's experiment, got attention from *India Today* as they saw it as "the calling card of a writer with the power to fascinate" (Khair, 1995). Khair considers the literary works published before 2000 not mature, as he was young and struggling to find his voice. His collection of poems, *Where Parallel Lines Meet* (Penguin), proved a significant work that helped him get the popular All India Poetry Prize. Khair claimed in interviews that after this work, "he feels that he has achieved a 'mature creative voice'" (Dwivedi, 11). Khair's *Babu Fictions* (2001), a critical book on IEL that questions issues of alienation, exile and language in Indian writing,

provided new possibilities for the critical modes employed in Indian fiction written in English. Khair also co-edited an anthology of travel writing with Martin Leer, Justin D. Edwards and Hanna Ziadeh, entitled *Other Routes* (2005), exploring the biased views of the West against the explorations undertaken by Africans and Asians. Focusing on the postcolonial aspects of Khair's *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (2009) explores the controversial issues of Otherness and Sameness while using the Gothic elements to distinguish between differences and similarities and their ulterior interpretation. Khair's theoretical and critical book, co-authored with Sébastien Doubinsky, *Reading Literature Today* (2011), provides an understanding of the new and emergent relationship between the author and the reader and the marketability of literature in this increasingly globalised world. Khair's recent scholarly work, *Literature Against Fundamentalism* (2024), explores the importance of literature as the antidote to fundamentalism because of its distinct mode of thinking, which helps counter the fundamentalist ideology. Khair's artistic works have been translated into many languages, such as Portuguese, Italian, Russian, French, and Danish.

Khair's most celebrated novel, *The Bus Stopped* (2004), set in rural Bihar, India, explores temporal and spatial consciousness through a bus journey from Gaya to Phansa. Phansa is a fictional space created by Khair near Gaya, a half-backed provincial town or mimic periphery: cosmopolitan, described by Khair in the introduction of *Twelve from a Taluk Town: Selected Short Stories* (2022), where Khair's most beautiful memories of childhood and home remains a constant fictional set up for him that Khair revisits in all his fictional world. *Filming: A Love Story*, set in nineteenth-century India, explores the dark era of Bollywood cinema in India, identity conflicts, religious intolerance, the complexities of the Indian partition and how poor people are affected in those violent times. His next novel, *The Thing About the Thugs*, set in late Victorian London, explores the confession of a thug and examines the Orientalist approach by Britishers

towards the native Indians and Africans in terms of race and class, where intricate narrativization of cultures perpetrate violence. *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, set in Denmark, explores, in a satirical tone, the problems of immigration because of prejudice against difference and how Western media take Muslim identities and Islamic fundamentalism after the wake of the 9/11 bomb blast. His next novel, *Jihadi Jane*, set in England and Seria, focuses on the issue of terrorism and Jihad, where he explores how social media and narrativization have changed the young mind of which girls from Islamist backgrounds taking part in Jihad ensuing violence that has shocked the contemporary world. *Night of Happiness*, set in India, explores the complexities of social and religious lifestyles between Hindu and Muslim communities, especially those affected by the Godhra Kand in Gujarat, India. His recent sci-fi novel, *The Body by the Shore*, set in Denmark and the sea, explores the post-pandemic world and its competitive life where survival of the fittest works best in this prominent capitalist society and powerful mind that runs the world.

Khair, in his novels, raises many critical and fundamental questions related to identity conflict, violence, nationality, xenophobia, fundamentalism, racism, ethnicity, poverty, migration, postcolonial revisionist writing[1], anti-colonial discourse, alienation, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, etc., as the major themes in his works. Mostly, people see and think about physical violence and believe that only fundamentalism or terrorism are the kinds of violence. They do not see capitalism, language, secularism, cosmopolitanism, modernity, globalisation, etc., as forms of violence, and Khair raises these questions tactfully in his novels. Khair's novels focused on the themes of identity and violence, compel people to think and experience Otherness in themselves by making the understanding of Otherness and difference, a hidden part of oneself as scholars pointed out

[1] Here, by the term 'postcolonial revisionist writing', I mean rethinking the problems of postcolonial canon where we tend to take mostly single perspective.

in *Tabish Khair: Critical Perspectives*, "Khair inexorably alters his readers' perception of the world, but above all, one's perception of one's own borders" (2014, xiii).

1.4 Khair's Writing Style and Technique

Khair's writing style is unusual, unchronological and a multi-dimensional narrative, while his complex characters keep steady progress, having intertextual references. There is a sense of correspondence between postcolonialism and postmodernism in Khair's works, especially in his novels, bridging the gap between different genres, as he does not acknowledge himself as a writer of any fixed genre. Khair's narrativization is "purely non-western yet deeply underpinned by multilayered narratives" (Dwivedi 2013, 12), making his writing style beyond any genre bracket. Khair self-refuses "to be enveloped within the rubric of diasporic author" as he intends to go beyond "West's dominant discourse" (2013, 12). Khair's writing diverges from purely postcolonial writings because Khair often uses multilingual and translational English. Scholars point out that "our understanding of Indian literature is based on an interconnection and cross-fertilisation between translational and multilingual practices, exemplified by the code-switching present in Indian fiction" (Ciocca and Srivastava 2017, 8), and Khair aptly uses this technique. Unlike many Western countries, India's national identity, in terms of language, comes from multilingualism, so in the representation of nationalism and nation-building, literary production plays a critical role and "Khair constantly plays with transcriptions and/or translations from one language to the other and makes a very witty use of fragments, pieces and small linguistic tokens" (*Tabish Khair: Critical Perspectives*, xvi).

Khair makes intersectionality between languages— switches from English to Hindi words or sentences— and sometimes a smattering of regional colloquial languages in his novels, where the border is porous and has a Glocal aspect for the readers. Khair also uses transcriptions and

sometimes translates one language from another, providing a multicultural scene that is witty and entertaining for readers. Because of this technique, Khair sometimes successfully translates the emotions of local people in India, as seen in his novel, *The Bus Stopped* or *Filming: A Love Story*. Khair translates such emotions in his novels but partly misses them as he accepts that "there are things I cannot see in books" (Khair, 2004, 198). However, this missing gives him something: a broader perspective to see and speak about the things that are hidden or unspoken. Emily Apter rightly talks about the importance of translation and simultaneously its untranslatability as constitutive, which she argues takes on the level of world literature. Apter sees this translation failure as a 'creative failure' that is important in this era of glocalisation (2013, 16).

Unlike other Indian English writers, Khair's writing has some peculiar rural aura. Joel Kuorrti examines the use of the hybrid language by Khair in his article, "No need to be called by another name": Multilingual challenge to Global English in Tabish Khair's Novel *The Bus Stopped*, where he points out how cleverly Khair "[u]ses different registers of English for different characters depending upon their social status…" (2013, 15), pointing out that "such a use of English undermines the positionality of English because it demands a wider understanding of cultural underpinnings" (Dwivedi, 15). Dwivedi argues Khair "[i]s not the kind of author who twists his style to meet the demands of the publishing industry-especially those which are always inclined towards publishing fictions containing post-colonial themes" (2013, 13). Khair's strength "lies in the fact that unlike other post-colonial authors, he does not exoticise the Orientals" (Dwivedi, 13); instead, he gives them an alternative space to think about humanity and the world. Khair's novels are faithful to this ideology as "[h]e is a socially responsible writer who writes not to entertain but to augment the moral and ethical values in society" (Dwivedi, 13); for this trend in writing, Khair "emerges as a liberalist, and to be more accurate a humanist, and for this reason" Dwivedi argues Khair "always refuses to

bracket his works under the rubrics of colonialism/postcolonialism studies" (13). Kahir is a "kind of writer who subverts all forms of literary genre" (Dwivedi, 13). While primarily recognised as a creative writer, Khair can also be regarded as a commentator on issues of social justice. His incisive engagement with pressing societal concerns has led scholars to describe him as "a humanist" (2014, xv). This dual role as a literary scholar and social thinker situates him as a significant voice in contemporary IEF, focusing on the problems of global inequality and suffering.

Tabish Khair is a creative writer who never limits his writings to the same genre. Khair's novels are different in style and setting and narrated from a different perspective. He is a proficient architect, and his fiction, despite his experiments with different cultural, spatial, temporal and linguistic stances, proves how he brings sensitive and political issues to light without being affected by the different colours he touches to portray his stories in his fictional world. In a way, Khair's fiction works as a critique for the readers, showing the mirror of society through different strata of characters and how they react to life, providing a new perspective on the world. The way Khair presents the succession of events, images, silences, and gaps in his novels weaves a net to catch the complete attention of readers, and his myriad characters constantly surprise them with unexpected tones, indicating the stark reality of life where people lose themselves. Khair does not give too much room for comfort and easy access to the readers in his literary art as his fiction demands an active engagement with the story; he does not explain so many things but gives hints to understand the reality of the society as Gillian Dooley affirms that "Khair is a writer who makes demands on his readers" (Dooley 2013, 94).

Even the readers who know his work and style of writing find his fiction with a new tinge and mystery; they need patience to solve the puzzle and fill the gaps intentionally left by Khair. Khair's representation of society, especially Indian society, is sound in terms of ground reality but

shaky when he talks about the experiences of marginalised or subalterns, as he believes he cannot represent and talk about someone he cannot understand and relate to properly. Khair is a sharp critic of harmful social elements, but his use of language is conscientious regarding its effects. He is cognizant of the power of language, especially the language used in literature, and its shaping and adapting nature to connect with reality or to make a fictional reality. Khair knows how words can strongly affect the readers if not put in the right direction by the narrator. Khair's fiction, like *Night of Happiness*, *The Bus Stopped*, or *Jihadi Jane*, very aptly explores the malleability of language that can lead to one's favour or discrimination and how it can make people vulnerable at the same time, privileged. He always amazes readers with his construction and representation of new fiction by enlivening social, mythical and historical facts as he believes in sound understating and research before putting the facts in his literary works, making him a writer who is not afraid of exposing the antithetical life-situations and human nature.

Khair paints his fictional world with small details and vivid colours, but as he is more in favour of bringing the problem of society than simply showing a happy world, his readers find his works aligned with a humane sense where life is not all about a bed of roses. If Khair shows the pleasant rising sun, he is conscious of showing the bitter nights and never forgets the black moon of suffering for many who somehow survive. Khair is a writer who believes more in results than rules; because of this, it is hard to describe his narrative style as he goes beyond traditional narratives. Khair's novels bring new kinds of narratives, such as *The Body by the Shore*, a speculative sci-fi novel filled with mystery, set on the sea and an oil rig, making it a petrofiction.

1.5 Postcolonial Literary Theory and Canon

The literature considered postcolonial literature comes from the three main continents: Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Postcolonial

literature, especially novels, is the direct result of the postcolonial criticism which arose in the wake of the turbulent struggles for national independence of many countries from the Global South. Chinua Achebe suggests that 'Postcolonial study aims to break the understanding of the world that is Eurocentric.' Bill Ashcroft defined postcolonial literature as "[T]o cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day" (Ashcroft et al. 2002, 2). So, in a sense, Postcolonial novels try to subvert the effects of colonial violence by providing a counterargument and anti-colonial discourse for imperialism's cultural and material domination and later become a tool to analyse the ideological bases of colonial domination. Influential figures like Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Albert Memmi and Mahatma Gandhi were early proponents of Postcolonial literature. However, Edward Said, Spivak, and Bhabha are considered the Trinity of Postcolonial theory, introducing new theoretical vocabulary in literary scholarship, especially novels. Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), Bill Ashcroft's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), and Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) gave new insight and momentum that led to a new academic field, 'Postcolonial literature,' which became the most dominant genre in the Global South.

In Orientalism, Said explored the fundamental term of postcolonialism, the dichotomy between the Occident and the Orient, by pointing out the dehumanization and commodification of the East in Occident literature also how the East, with her exotic spices and cultures, served as a space for adventure and thus influenced European materials as a sort of factory of the exotic. In *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Spivak poses the question of whether subalterns who come from the margins even have the option to speak on their behalf and find they do not have, pointing out that intellectuals of postcolonial critics always speak for them. Spivak says that even the most benevolent effort to represent their rights merely repeats the very silencing it aims to combat. This representation serves as epistemic violence for the subaltern. The subaltern is always seen as "Other",

"inhuman", and "different" by imperialistic power and, consequently, understood by the Occident as inferior. Spivak took the discussion of 'self and other' a step further when she suggested that imperialistic powers cannot essentialize and homogenize a large community of people (subaltern) and slap them with a broad term as "Other" because subaltern always stands in an ambiguous relation to power and do not have their own identity. Thus, Spivak declares, "One must nevertheless insist that the colonised subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (Spivak 2003).

The postcolonial canon and its formation are interesting and, at the same time, challenging to define. The postcolonial canon in IEL builds on the few selected celebrated writers and their works as Toni Morrison sees canon building as empire-building, emphasising that canonicity is more about power and status than texts whose dominant discourse defines the discipline, affecting individual authors and entire movements and discourses of postcolonial studies. In the Indian subcontinent, postcolonial literature is mainly represented by a few celebrated writers such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra, Amitabh Ghosh, Shyam Selvadurai and a few others whose works make the literary canon in Indian postcolonial literature. These canonical writers mostly focus on urban spaces, whereas there is a vast terrain of rural and subaltern spaces that are unexplored or are not reflected in their works. They do not focus on these rural spaces and their people because of the publishing industry and market visibility, for such writers write with a Western mindset. One of the reasons for this is the commodification of literature. Postcolonial literature has become more of a commodity than art because of the promotion and marketability strategy and the politics of publishers. The canonical/privileged writers act like gatekeepers to accept and reject what good literature is or not, which Graham Huggan terms "postcolonial exoticism" in *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001). Such texts deemed "worthy of study" are transmitted, translated, critiqued and anthologised, dominating

the whole postcolonial literary canon by defining new writing styles and perspectives.

Meanwhile, many other good writers get little or no recognition and suffer in academia. While exploring the works of Tabish Khair, this study analyses how his works explore different spaces to bring a new perspective to postcolonial writing. Khair's writing redefines postcolonial literature, giving a glocal aspect to his fiction. His novels challenge the Eurocentric notion of the fixed theory of postcolonial literature, defying genre distinction and taking a different approach to project the different space and their problems in his novels. His works bring a new perspective of hybridity and subalternity to the major discourses of postcolonial theory; Khair's self-reflexive criticism of novels redefines such terms in Indian contexts while exploring the different local spaces of India. There is a vast difference and disparity in the writings of postcolonial authors as they are from their respective spaces and represent their geographies, which somehow emerge into making a canon. Dr Menon argues, "[p]ostcolonial works from metropolitan centers and select metropolitan writers has dominated the discourse of postcolonial criticism, thereby centralising a select genre and universalizing it as representative of postcolonialism per se" (2016, 4), suggesting how diverse different spaces and languages will broaden the discipline opening new postcolonial avenues. Khair writes in English, but he uses multiple Hindi dialects and local colloquial languages to broaden the understanding of rural people; at the same time, his novel explores different temporal and rural spaces in Indian society. Khair has created a local fictional rural space, 'Phansa', in Bihar near Gaya, to relocate the rural people and their cultures and how they live differently in such places.

Dr. Menon pointed out the materialist criticism of Lazarus regarding postcolonial theory, where he sees it as "[a] constitutive anti-Marxism; an undifferentiated disavowal of all forms of nationalism and a corresponding exaltation of migrancy, liminality, hybridity, and multiculturality; an

aversion to dialectics; and a refusal of antagonistic or struggle-based model of politics (423)" (2016, 3). These criticisms reveal a void in postcolonial theory, where many literary scholars working in postcolonial studies have tended to write with a restricted and attenuated corpus of works because of the narrowness of the theoretical assumptions (Lazarus), and Khair tries to fill that void through his creative writings. Said's *Orientalism* gave a roadmap for postcolonial writers and critics to understand the discipline, emphasising that 'orientalism has nothing to do with Orient', criticising the West for their mind-made fictive understanding of the Global South and East to rule them. However, Khair suggests the condition of postcolonial studies: "It is this that often makes me frustrated even with much of acclaimed post-colonial literature, for very often this literature is only concerned with the bridge of West-and-the-Rest" (Verma 2008, 4). So, Tabish Khair's writings create an 'anti-binary approach that seeks to dismantle the east/west or north/south discourse' in the fast-changing global world. Khair brings a new perspective to postcolonial Indian writing through his self-reflexive criticism and inclusive spaces of rural India. He focuses on the other side of society, where the poor, despite their majority, are continuously marginalised, suffering from violence and political propaganda perpetrated by the people in power.

Said's criticism of canons in terms of 'canonical center' brings a new understanding of canon that operates from 'nomadic centers' (1994, xi), which are never permanent and offer new forms of continuity, vision and revision, providing an interventionist aspect and dismantling the fixed center which claims permanence. Dr Menon defines that "[p]ostcolonial literature, much like its predecessor, Commonwealth literature, exists as an island that brings in a lot of goods (and stories) of postcolonialism while the metropolitan center surveys the marketplace and takes what it needs from the island" (2016, 8-9). So, Said's notion of provisional and non-permanent canons can be a useful self-reflexive critical tool to examine the postcolonial canon. Khair's writings immensely contribute to IEL as an interventionist

mode to counter the center of the postcolonial canon, fitting somehow in the manner of Said's 'nomadic centres.'

1.6 Understanding the Literary/Popular/Commercial/Genre Literature

There are unabashed debates about the differences and standards between literary and popular literature in terms of its oppositional traits like high and low in academia: Varughese (2017), Anjaria (2019), Srivastava and Sinha (2021), etc. It is essential to understand what makes a novel popular, how popular fiction differs from literary fiction, and why we need it in the contemporary era. By analyzing the novels based on popular mythology-inspired fiction, E Dawson Varughese says, "[t]he idea that India is a postcolonial literature-producing nation is challenged, suggesting that such notions are of an erstwhile India and that a lack of insight on the part of the Western academy as to India's domestic fiction production is responsible for this blinkered position" (2017, 1). Many new talented writers emerged on the horizon of IEL, boosting many new literary festivals in different Indian cities, where book launching and prize ceremonies are celebrated, giving a new leap in genre/popular fiction production. E Dawson argues, "[t]his new body of writing is a marked departure from the 'literary fiction' of Rushdie and Roy. Critically labelled as 'paraliterature', such writing might be described as 'commercial', 'popular' or 'genre' fiction" (2017, 9). Gupta (2012) says-

> The Indian commercial fiction in English which circulates predominantly within the country can be regarded as reasonably distinct from the 'literary fiction' in English which has a larger-than-Indian presence. Neither are, however, mutually impervious or exclusive areas. Despite numerous efforts to describe these terms according to content – as if texts have immanent qualities of commercialness and literariness – both are plausibly understood as market-led categories (46) (Varughese, 9).

For Gupta, this new 'commercial fiction' is 'consumed primarily within India', seen to display a kind of 'Indianness' that Indians appreciate and is not meant to be taken 'seriously' or regarded as 'literary', writes that "literary fiction is the respectable public face of Indian literature in English abroad and at home, while commercial fiction is the gossipy café of Indian writing in English at home (47)" (Varughese, 10). Analyzing such novels, Varughese argues, "This creativity is clearly true of mythology-inspired fiction overall, taking the established genres of the 'thriller', 'historical' or 'fantasy' fiction and twisting, shaping and culturally moulding the genres to form what I call 'Bharati Fantasy'" (2017, 11). Varughese differentiates 'commercial', 'popular' and 'genre' fiction in her study-

> 'Commercial' is understood here as pertaining to large print runs, paperback books with large sales and complementary marketing campaigns; 'popular' fiction is understood here to mean fiction that is consumed by blue- and grey-collar workers, interfacing with the contemporary moment (to a greater or lesser degree) and 'commercial' in its sales figures. […] the term 'genre' here is used to talk about groupings of 'types' of fiction production such as the established categories of 'fantasy', 'sci-fi', 'thriller' or 'romance' (and their sub-genres) (2017, 12).

Varughese's analysis of genre fiction is specifically interested in defining and understanding the 'weird fiction' in the Indian context through its own cultural anchorage and how these new fictions from India are yet to be studied within Western academia, which she argues that reading of such fictions will be a challenging one without the lens of postcolonial theory. She argues that "the nature of these fictions as 'commercial' or 'popular' has meant that the Western academy has been less ready to study such texts given that the tradition, especially within postcolonial studies in England at least, has been to study 'literary' works of which the popular is not considered part" (2017, 18). The new generation of India, particularly the

younger generation, wants to connect with their Indian philosophy and heritage by consuming new writing trends where they can connect themselves with their past and simultaneously enjoy their present lifestyle. Varughese talks about a new genre of writing which draws on ideas from history and a confluence of different genres that she terms, 'Bharati Fantasy' defending her arguments that "although the retelling and reimaginings of Hindu epic narratives is not a new phenomenon, the entrance of Bharati Fantasy into the Indian writing in English scene is new in terms of how scholars have previously viewed the canon of Indian writing in English and in particular, its postcolonial identity" (2017, 35). Khair's novels bring such a new trend in IEL, emerging both literary and popular in postcolonial tradition, developing a new Indian genre of fiction that this thesis terms "popular postcolonial fiction".

Varughese sees popular or genre fiction differently. She is against dismissing such genre fiction based on its myth-inspired works or poor quality, as she finds this is unjust, inaccurate and, in a sense, tragic. Such dismissal can lead one to miss the significant impact these works are having on the Indian zeitgeist, offering a much more nuanced view in terms of not concerning such works' high or low literary quality. Focusing on multiple genres and media, crossing the divide between "high" and "low" fiction and between languages, Ulka Anjaria analyses the contemporary formations in literature and popular culture in a time period that she calls 'the Indian contemporary' (2019). Anjaria argues that "critics are accustomed to looking to literature and art as a bulwark against myopism, provincialism, and the market, we end up missing all the complex ways in which writers engage with the present and, often, imagine alternatives to it" (2019, 3). She proposes a contrast of understanding between postcolonial and contemporary literature, particularly in Anglophone theory, as postcolonial theory has been a dominant lens in studying Indian literature and culture for decades. However, there is growing scepticism about this trend of study. Anjum Hasan (2014), a novelist and critic, laments that the "potential

diversity" of new Indian literature "has been straitjacketed by the idea of 'genre.' Genres are being created in assembly-line fashion and are received as such by readers" (Anjaria 2019, 11).

Anjara says, "[w]hen scholars read new texts, they do so through the old lenses" (2019, 12), pointing out the need for a new, fresh perspective of literature that is not corrupted by the literary market that seeks the voice of the subaltern or marginalised. She further suggests that even if we might make it impure or not fit to standard, we can "see what new possibilities it offers us. It might not resemble the literature we are used to; it might even mean, as Anjum Hasan (2016) writes, "a rejection of literature"" (Anjaria, 14) hoping for a new fresh IEL that will bring a new dawn in the writing styles of contemporary Indian literature. Chetan Bhagat (2014) writes:

> My simple stories are set in contemporary India and reflect society as it is today. And that may be one reason why the West is not so interested in me. I write the actual reality of India, versus the exotic India Westerners would rather read about. My characters are looking for jobs while falling in love. […] If there is a villager in my book, chances are he will be visiting a cyber café, checking his phone or trying to get ahead in life. Don't know if the West is ready for or interested in that India (Anjaria, 20).

Bhagat's statement gives a sense of rejection of the so-called fixed or static image of IEL from the global perspective, bringing a trend of contemporary popular novels with new possibilities and colours to IEF. Scholars point out how "in the 1980s and 1990s, 'exile,' 'diaspora,' and 'cosmopolitanism' were the privileged terms of the Indian English imagination (Lau and Dwivedi 2014, 7)" (Anjaria, 28) in IEL which started changing with the coming of popular or genre fictions in English as Rajeev Patke writes, "English is an antidote to provincialism and narrow-mindedness; it is the language of translation and access to the world's literary cultures" (2016, 296). By pointing to writers of popular fiction like Chetan Bhagat, Ravinder

Singh, Amish Tripathi, Durjoy Datta, and Anuja Chauhan, Anjaria argues that we need a reimagination of emerging discourses redefining India's new literary forms bringing new potential, opportunities and enterprise in the IEL bringing to the masses that was limited to only a few elite people in the country (28). Anjaria emphasises the importance of popular literature by arguing that "new English-language commercial fictions reorient postcolonial geographies that valorised exile over nationalism to offer a new representation of India for their Indian readership" (29).

Anjaria notes, "[a]lthough seemingly simplistic in terms of plot, characters, and style, the new commercial fiction entails a rethinking of what literature is, the role of its readers, and its relationship to the world it describes" (29) mobilizing the new trends and emergence of popular literature in India. This mobilisation of new discourses in writings, 'going against the postcolonial novel', the contemporary popular literature brings a new Indian provincialism which suits better Indian lifestyles, as we notice in Khair's novels like *The Bus Stopped* and *Filming: A Love Story*. Anjaria says that although Chetan Bhagat is not the first writer of popular literature or pulp in India (Khair 2008; Mongia 2015; Kaur 2012), he successfully made a prominent impact in IEL (30). Unlike Rushdie's or Ghosh's English, Khair's English is standard with regional neutrality; as Anjara pointed out, Bhagat's 'stripped-down English' (49), which is easily digestible for the mass audience, where India's middle class can also afford to read and understand. In his novels, Khair's provincial and rural understanding brings a new light to IEF while synchronising both local and global aspects of life, creating glocal literature. Pointing to the writing style of Bhagat, Anjaria argues, "While Bhagat's might be bad writing, it is bad writing with a purpose" (50) because Bhagat proved how an Indian English writer could change the perception of readers of English novels in India by bringing down the standard English in a certain level from the elite art to the mass Indian population. Bhagat brought a new light and energy among India's youth as his novels are cheap and easy to read, making the popular literature

popular in the domain of IEL, also making Indian English indigenized English that not only counterparts Salman Rushdie's 'chutnification' but also brought an Indianness in the language which Indian people connect and speak regularly.

Tabish Kahir does not compromise with the standard of Indian English in his novels. He writes without losing the literary aesthetics, breaking the conventional writing styles of centre and periphery in postcolonial literature. Khair sees a need to go beyond this difference between literary and popular literature, between high and low literature, to improve the critical and intellectual standards, and we find this amalgamation and fusion of both the opposition into one style in his novels. Khair argues, "[t]he way to raise critical standards is to go beyond glib binaries like literary/pulp, high/low, art/popular, etc." (Srivastava and Sinha 2021, 9). There has always been an oppositional take between popular (pulp) and literary in literature. Using qualitative and quantitative terms, Khair points out how both assumptions are problematic, arguing that "in quantitative terms, 'pulp' denotes cheaply published fiction aimed at the mass market," while "in qualitative terms, 'pulp fiction' often stands for either 'bad literature' or literature with a simple narrative, written in an easily accessible style" (2021, 10). Khair posits, "[p]ulp fiction is fiction that uses largely fixed generic features to satisfy the largely fixed reading expectations of as large a market as possible" (10). That suggests a kind of slippery mode, and if that can happen, argues Khair, then a literary novel "that does not challenge the fixed generic features of the 'literary novel' […] is essentially pulp, and a 'pulp novel' that exceeds the generic limits of its pulp category can be literary" (2021, 11). Therefore, Khair's understanding of the definition of pulp fiction, at times, can be extended to literary fiction as well. Khair wants a decentralised form of literature that can accommodate both literary and popular together, going beyond the genre distinction in his works, which this study calls "popular postcolonial

fiction." We will explore this popular postcolonial fiction extensively in the second chapter.

Khair writes, "What unites all these genres is the story" (2021, 11) that really matters, connecting both pulp and literary novels. He argues it "would be a rash critic—and, I would say, a prejudiced reader—who would say that Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot* is less in terms of the art of the story than William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*" (2021, 11) making clear how he sees contemporary literature, a good reason that why do we need popular literature too. Khair says the main point about stories is that "they are the most common, most pervasive, and perhaps even the oldest way for humans to think" (2021, 12). When we miss this point of how stories function in literature, we tend to reduce their potential, as stories in literature can take us to very complex contemplation. Khair's recent book, *Literature Against Fundamentalism* (2024), extends this idea, exemplifying how religious fundamentalists, who see stories only in terms of a single idea or getting from point A to B, end up destroying the essence of their religions. Whether it is religious people or politicians, they think best in stories in terms of powerful narratives. Khair laments the condition of humanity and literature today because stories have reduced their impact in literature; one area where stories were taken seriously has been reduced to fixed understanding, losing their confidence. He argues-

> The Humanities have been too busy trying to justify stories in all possible terms—entertainment, discourse, narratology, cognitivist structures, reader response, Darwinism, etc.—instead of working on how to best think in stories. The total failure of academics, publishers and editors to talk of literature as literature—not just what sells, or a set of 'reader responses', or a soporific, or passing politics, etc.—is an index of this failure (2021, 14).

Popular literature in English has made English the national language of India because of its acceptability and commercial success in India and

abroad, where famous faces like Chetan Bhagat, Amish Tripathi, Preeti Shenoy and others are successful writers of popular fiction who provided a new taste and readership of younger class which emerged as the new middle-class readers in India making English affordable and democratic for middle classes too, earlier which was limited to elite or babu class. They succeeded not only in the new readership but also in their huge sales in the publishing market, making English through pulp/popular as the language of the middle classes. Khair argues that "post-truth society is not primarily the result of our inability to focus on facts; it is due to our failure to read stories deeply. Just as there are ways in which facts can be used positively or negatively, there are ways in which stories can be read—to make us think or to prevent us from thinking" (2021, 14).

1.7 Khair's Theoretical and Critical Underpinnings

One index of Tabish Khair's radicality as an author is his relative defiance of contemporary literary theory. Combining his mastery of creativity with intellectual vibrancy, Khair overturns many firmly established conceptions. Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger were the proponents of the linguistic turn in philosophy, albeit in different ways. From Saussure onwards, this turn believes that since language is ruptured with configuration, it cannot accurately represent the world, as words depend on other words for their meaning, not on any extra-linguistic entity. Since language is arbitrary, there is no privileged connection between it and reality and no natural connection between words and the world. Therefore, no meaningful "real" world can exist outside language, textuality, or representation. Khair is somewhat ambivalent about the language-centred philosophy. First, he rejects the one-to-one correspondence between language and reality, aligning with "Saussure, Derrida and the post-modern perspectives" and their "complex and fraught engagement with language, reality and literature" (*Reading Literature Today* 2011, 145). Second, though Khair concedes that the "notion of 'reality' is always constructed by language and so is partly 'fictional'", he firmly rejects the notion that

"language is the *only* reality" (*Babu Fictions*, 6). He argues that "literature is written in language about that which cannot and will not be confined to language" (2011, 8).

Contrary to the post-structuralist position, Khair affirms literature is "the experience of 'reality'… which *also* exists outside language, as psychological, mental states, nature, relations, material facts, and so on, that can *only* be 'approached' or 'approximated' in language" (2011, 8). Khair proposes a positive redefinition of literature- "Literature *qua* literature is that which always presses against the limits of language: in that sense, to read literature is to read also the gaps, silences, obstacles and noise in its language, in its narrative." Also argues, "The best writers make the most of not just what can be said but, above all, what cannot be said" (2011, 10-11). Insisting on "a mutual commerce between 'reality' and 'language'", he finds "some postmodernist positions to be untenable, if only because they seem to simplify matters in the name of complicating them" (2011, 150). Khair sees literature as not divorced from society; the material is not separate from the symbolic- "For, again and again, literature shows itself as engaged with and in the world, which is material, phenomenal, political, cultural, gendered, social, existential, and so on, of course" (2011, 74). This explains Khair's prescription for "Good literature", which "provides one of those rare spaces in which the invisible relations between language and reality, between the symbolic and the material, are condensed into the tension of art" (2011, 27).

Khair also emphasises the active and creative role of the reader in *Reading Literature Today*: "Some gaps and silences ask to be excavated, and hence demand the participation of the reader" (11). Equating a reader with the critic, he argues, a reader is not "a blank receptor of the intentions of the author or the text" but is someone who "actually reads, think, suppose, guess; discern the meaning of; inspect and interpret" (15). Borrowing Seamus Heaney's metaphor of "digging" from his poem

'Digging', Khair calls reading "an act of digging" where a reader is "an active thinker and interpreter" (15). Khair sides with Iser and distances himself from Barthes when he dismisses the birth of the Reader-without-History, as he asserts that the Reader-without-History is "a non-reader, […] a passive receptor, […] a simple celebrator of the text, not […] someone who interprets, guesses and digs" (2011, 19). Conceding that fiction differs from fact, a novel differs from sociology, history, or autobiography, Khair asserts that there is "an intricate relationship between facts and fiction, between sociology/history/autobiography and creative writing" (23). A reader's blindness to these narrative gaps is an "insult" (23) to both the writer's art and the reader's skills because Khair believes that it is "not in what literature says that it becomes literature but in what it tries to say, fails to say and says between the lines or in its gaps. Literature is language that challenges the limits of language" (23).

Khair argues in *Babu Fictions* (2001) that "Babu fictions are about India and Indians, but their language is not always the language of Indian or Indians" (59-60), pointing out a division between Babus (the elite and higher class in India who is fluent in English) and Collies (illiterate and poor class of India who do not understand English) in India. He emphasizes the problems of representation and agency in Babu-dominated literature, repressing the predominantly Coolie speech of India by pointing out how the basis for circumscribing India in IEF finds its literary predecessors in Orientalist and also Brahminical texts (2001, 143). Khair closely examined how Raja Rao draws on Sanskritized elements of Indian culture (205), thus universalizing those texts that are defined only for his (Raja Rao's) Babu class; in the same way, calling attention to Rushdie's utilizing ancient Islamic doubts in, for example, the Satanic Verses and Naipaul's understanding of India where Babu fictions choose to see India as a poor copy of the Western world (2001, 245-255). Khair defines babu fiction as "Modern novel can be seen as a genre growing out of certain material and symbolic factors and, moreover, a genre whose various manifestations were

already possible with other (non-European) cultural formations as well" (2001, 41). Because Khair argues that IEF should be read "against the fallacy of seeing the modern novel as a direct borrowing from the West" (41) which is mostly the case in the postcolonial lens.

Khair points out two significant problems for the Indian English writer— a difficulty which Aijaz Ahmad also notes in the context of using English as the language in which the knowledge of Indian literature is produced— are "the problem of dialogue and the problem of mapping" (2001, 99). The important question is whether the novelist reproduces authentic Indian dialogue in English; Khair argues, "Indian English is not an alien language and need not be evaluated in comparison to any other, real or grammatical, version of the English language" (2001, 100). The authorial paratextual elements in the English novels are not transparent in the Indian context, and "a text produced in English needs a clarifying discourse" (111); a good example is Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. However, Khair points out that both Rushdie's *The Midnight Children* and Seth's *A Suitable Boy* lack these paratextual elements: an authorial Forward or postludial Notes/Glossary. (111). Does this absence mean a greater transparency of English/ or English language now fully capable of mapping India, or, as Seth believes, are Indian writers writing for an Indian readership today? It is not justified. So, Khair argues that attitude has changed the entire problem concerning narrating India in English, a desire to stress transparency (112). Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests in a radio interview that "while Rushdie and later writers do lay with words, this 'play' is circumscribed and explained by or in the context of their narration" (2001, 112). Khair reiterates that "for the Babu writer, English remains a fully legitimate choice- for though s/he speaks other languages s/he reads and writes mostly in English" (125), warning further, "But to make Indian English aspire to the condition of, say, Caribbean or American English would be to alienate oneself from what actually exists in India and among Indians" (125).

1.8 Background and Literature Review

Despite Khair's significant contributions to Indian English novels (IEN) and postcolonial thought, there are few scholarly and thematic engagements with Khair's fiction that, too, remain limited. Among the few notable critical interventions in Khair's works are as follows. *Tabish Khair: Critical Perspectives* (2014), a volume edited by Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández and Om Prakash Dwivedi. This collection offers an array of thematic and theoretical aspects of research papers that critically examine Khair's novels alongside his theoretical writings. Another important earlier anthology in this volume is *Tabish Khair: A Critical Companion* (2013), also edited by Om Prakash Dwivedi, which comprises thirteen scholarly essays offering a multifaceted exploration of Khair's fiction and poetry. The collection is marked by its thematic and methodological diversity, where scholars in this volume engage with Khair's complex treatment of identity politics, migration, and de/construction of alterity, as well as Khair's historical re-imaginings of Partition, politics of memory, and violence. These two anthologies constitute foundational scholarly engagements with Khair's literary corpus and underscore his significance as a writer and thinker.

In addition, a few doctoral and master's theses have offered nuanced engagements with his fiction, extending scholarly understanding of his thematic preoccupations and theoretical underpinnings. María Eugenia Ossana's master's thesis, *"The West and Its Islamic 'Otherness': Irony Reversals in Tabish Khair's Just Another Jihadi Jane" (2017)*, undertakes a critical examination of Islamic terrorism and its agents in Khair's novel highlighting the ideological production of the Islamic 'Other' where Khair's fiction offers a subversive reading of radicalisation. Similarly, Tahura Tariq's doctoral dissertation from AMU, *"Postmodern Anxiety in Select Novels of Tabish Khair"* (2014), explores the manifestations of postmodern anxiety in Khair's narrative landscapes, situating Khair's fiction within a

broader postmodern paradigm. Mustafa Büyükgebiz's thesis from Pamukkale University, *"Postcolonial Discontent in Tabish Khair's Selected Works"* (2019), explores the lingering effects of colonial and postcolonial ways of thinking by focusing on the themes of discontent, otherness, anarchy, religious and ethnic violence, emphasising Khair's intervention into the postcolonial discourse.

Recent research on Khair's works includes Syed Mustahsan Hashmi's doctoral thesis, *"Alienation and Diasporic Complex in the Works of Tabish Khair"* (Vinoba Bhave University, 2021), offers a critical exploration of Khair's understanding of diasporic consciousness, alienation, and the notion of 'otherness' in his novels through colonial and postcolonial discursive frameworks. Similarly, Mohd Rafiq undertakes a thematic analysis of four of Khair's novels in "*The Thematic Study of the Selected Fictional Works of Tabish Khair*" (Reva University, 2019) that explores regionalism, nostalgia, diaspora, Partition, religious intolerance, racism, ethnicity, postmodern anxiety, and jihad. Arun Nath's thesis, *"The Fictional Narratives of Tabish Khair: A Study on Social Realism"* (Nagaland University, 2022), offers another important exploration of Khair's novels by locating Khair within the tradition of Indian social realism. Positioning him alongside social realists such as Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy, Nath argues that Khair emerges as a vital voice articulating the contradictions and injustices of contemporary Indian societies.

Overall, these studies on Khair's oeuvre underscore a growing academic interest, with most studies focusing on or engaging with postcolonial and postmodern theories, diasporic subjectivity, and social critique. However, despite these thematic and theoretical underpinnings, there remains a critical lacuna in examining the intersectionality in Khair's fiction regarding how his own theoretical interventions pervade his representations of identity, violence, xenophobia and marginality. Earlier

scholarship treats these dimensions in isolation, lacking a rigorous intersectional framework synthesising Khair's theoretical intervention with his narrative strategies. Furthermore, Khair's dual role as both theorist and novelist has not been sufficiently explored to analyse how his fictional works actively perform and challenge theoretical constructs related to marginality, alterity, and the global postcolonial condition. The confluence of Khair's narrative practices with his theoretical insights into systemic violence, identity politics, and the narrativisation of identity in language has not been fully explored. Therefore, a more intersectional analysis, situating his fiction in the backdrop of postcolonial and postmodern theory, would offer a more comprehensive understanding of his contribution to contemporary IEF.

1.9 Research Questions and Objectives

This thesis particularly focuses on the idea of how identity and violence intersect with each other in the multicultural spaces of Tabish Khair's fiction. How can Tabish Khair's fiction be categorised between popular and literary fiction in Indian postcolonial literature? The objectives of this thesis are— to analyse Tabish Khair's intersectional identity as a writer in the genre of "popular postcolonial fiction." To analyse systemic violence by exploring Khair's non-fictional work, *The New Xenophobia* (2016), compared with his novels *Night of Happiness* and *The Body by the Shore*. To analyse how language manifests systemic violence through the lenses of glorification, thingification, and symbolic narrativisation in Khair's novels, *The Thing About Thugs* and *Jihadi Jane*. To analyse the concept of home and belongingness and how people suffer systemic violence by exploring third space in Khair's novels, *The Bus Stopped* and *Filming: A Love Story* in comparison with Bhabha's. Therefore, this thesis takes an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach towards analysing Khair's selected fiction.

1.10 Research Methodology

The thesis explores key issues like intersectionality of identity and violence, belongingness and representation of home, systemic violence, xenophobia/ new xenophobia, and narrativisation of violence. The fictions under consideration—the primary resource of this study— are grouped around Khair's selected novels; the rationale behind the choice is the selective narrative themes and textual data in Indian postcolonial studies. Thus, using a close reading of Khair's selected novels, the study examines the textual data, so the research methodology adopted is analytical and theoretical and uses qualitative analysis. Compared with his other works, the primary methodology is a close reading of Khair's selected fiction. His interviews, views played on record, his non-fictional writings, and his essays and news articles. In systemic violence, this thesis uses a comparative analysis of Zizek. The dissertation comprises six chapters: four main chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. This thesis includes an interview with Tabish Khair based on his views on the post-pandemic world and his understanding of postcolonial studies and the fundamentalist language. The complete interview is enclosed in the appendix.

1.11 Summary of Chapter Contents

Chapter two, *Embracing the Contrasts: Tabish Khair and Popular Postcolonial Fiction,* explores Khair's intersectional identity as a contemporary Indian English novelist by analysing Khair's *The Bus Stopped* (2004) and *Filming: A Love Story* (2007). Khair does not fit neatly into the recognised postcolonial fictional genres, and his novels do not fit into the genre of either popular or literary fiction in Indian postcolonial literature, occupying a liminal space situated in a "noman's land." This chapter argues that Khair inhabits a liminal space, putting him in a genre of "Popular postcolonial fiction." Khair diverges from postmodernism's ontological scepticism— aiming instead to depict impoverished lives with a level of genuine concern that postmodernism often resists. His novels

distinctly reflect the influences of both postcolonial and postmodern literature, where his approach balances a postmodern awareness, giving his work a distinctive voice in IEL that engages and critiques postmodernist ideas. Within this evolving literary landscape, his works deconstruct and complicate the prevailing conventions of postcolonial fiction. He transcends the rigid boundaries of genre classification, demonstrating a fluidity that allows a multifaceted exploration of themes and styles.

His novels have distinctive rural sensibility, new writing styles, stylistic innovations, and a peculiar rural aura, making them different from other contemporary Indian writers. Literary fiction in English, especially from the Indian subcontinent, has been represented in the canon of postcolonial literature by writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and others. Popular or populist fiction also saw a contemporaneous rise during the same period, underlined by bestselling authors such as Chetan Bhagat, Amish Tripathi, Preeti Shenoy and others. So, where is the place of a writer like Tabish Khair? This chapter argues that Khair's novels exist in a noman's land between these two demarcated genres of postcolonial fiction (literary and popular). Khair's writing creates a local niche that resonates internationally, distinguishing him from his contemporaries. Unlike many authors who adhere to a singular narrative mode, Khair continually experiments with new literary forms in each novel, resulting in a body of work that defies rigid classification and broadens the scope of contemporary fiction. Khair's novels resist easy classification, complicating the typical structures used to define postcolonial fiction. This resistance aligns with Chaudhuri's (2001) assertion that postcolonial narratives often serve as a vehicle for hybrid identities. This hybrid identity reflects broader trends within postcolonial literature, where authors often navigate complex cultural and linguistic landscapes. As Anjaria (2019) argues, contemporary Indian literature increasingly resists categorisation, challenging the binaries that have historically defined literary discourse (5).

This shift is evident in adopting narrative forms such as magical realism, structural 'bagginess,' non-linear storytelling, and hybridised language, trends often associated with post-Rushdie Indian fiction (Chaudhuri, 2004). The rise of these techniques also raises questions regarding the canonicity of IEL, challenging traditional genre classifications and opening new avenues for literary exploration. Khair's work aligns with postmodernism's emphasis on fragmentation and diversity, simultaneously challenging stable understandings of identity and cultural authenticity while calling into question grand narratives, whether historical, cultural, or ideological. Thus, His approach engages with postmodern concerns, bringing nuanced perspectives to cultural and philosophical destabilisation themes. His approach balances a postmodern awareness of the constructed nature of identity and experience with a realist commitment to address tangible social issues.

This chapter examines the place of Tabish Khair within this evolving literary landscape, focusing specifically on the writing styles and thematic concerns of "popular postcolonial fiction", and situates Khair's work within these broader debates, considering how his novels reflect and complicate the prevailing conventions of postcolonial fiction. This chapter also situates Khair as an 'in-between' or 'hybrid' writer within the canon of contemporary IEL, challenging traditional genre classifications and reexamining conventional categorisations in contemporary IEF. Postcolonial and popular in terms of Indian English authors are by no means exclusive, as they very often conflate. However, as a novelist, Khair's tenor does not fit neatly into the recognisable features of postcolonial literature at once, and his novels are uneasy alongside commercial or popular fiction. This uneasiness creates an in-between space between the postcolonial and the popular that Khair inhabits.

Chapter three, ***Systemic Violence and New Xenophobia in Khair's Novels, Night of Happiness and The Body by the Shore,*** seeks to

investigate the intersection of systemic violence with new xenophobia in Khair's *Night of Happiness* (2018) and *The Body by the Shore* (2022) through the lens of Khair's non-fictional book, *The New Xenophobia* (2016) and how it perpetrates systemic violence globally. This chapter analyses how systemic violence has emerged as a significant source of distress in the era of capitalism and high capitalism, where xenophobia has transformed into what Tabish Khair terms "new xenophobia," which becomes a ladder for people in power to get more capital and more power by utilizing the vulnerability of poor people. In *The New Xenophobia*, Tabish Khair examines the evolving nature of xenophobia, asserting that under the conditions of late or high capitalism, this phenomenon is characterised by a deceptive and systemic form of violence where new xenophobia creates systemic violence (2016, 8). Building on this conceptual framework, the present chapter aims to analyse "systemic violence" through Khair's articulation of "new xenophobia" in his novels *Night of Happiness*, set in India, and *The Body by the Shore*, set in Denmark. These narratives provide a fertile ground for examining the socio-political dynamics of systemic violence in both Indian and global contexts.

The chapter discusses systemic violence, which has become more pervasive in the age of high capitalism; as Han and DeMarco observe, systemic violence has "[s]hifted from the visible to the invisible, from the direct to the discreet, from the physical to the psychic, from the martial to the medial, and from the frontal to the viral" (2018, vii). Because of this shift, this violence becomes more dangerous compared to all the other types of violence. Systemic violence is perpetuated through the interplay of economic, social, and political structures that dominate and exploit individuals, particularly in precarious circumstances. In today's world, there is a growing fear of indirect violence perpetrated by large systems, institutions, and the powerful elites rather than the direct violence inflicted by ordinary individuals because the perpetration of physical violence has significantly decreased over recent decades (Han & DeMarco, 2018;

Viereck, 1995; Pinker, 2011; Khair, 2016). However, the perpetuation of systemic and epistemic violence has intensified in diverse and often subtle forms, making it increasingly difficult to identify, articulate, and address. Such violence manifests in various ways—through economic deprivation, social alienation, and psychological trauma—creating a form of harm that is difficult to confront or resist.

Tabish Khair asserts that "new xenophobia" predominantly operates within First World nations, including affluent European countries, as well as in "uneven capitalist societies like those of America or India" (2016, 6). According to Khair, the conditions necessary for the emergence of new xenophobia is the presence of "a globalised metropolitan culture" (48). Khair argues that high capitalism is the common denominator across diverse socio-economic contexts, serving as a primary catalyst for the emergence of new xenophobia and the systemic violence it engenders. Khair posits that old xenophobia transitions into new xenophobia within power structures where the unequal distribution of power, rather than mere fear of the unfamiliar, becomes the primary driver of violence. In this framework, new xenophobia shifts the focus from irrational fear of strangers to the systemic inequities created by uneven economic conditions. Therefore, Khair contextualises the concept of new xenophobia within the framework of globalisation and its profound effects on the relationship between capital and labour. While Khair's analysis provides valuable insight into how economic conditions foster new xenophobia and systemic violence, it remains primarily focused on the economic dimensions of these phenomena. The broader social and political tensions that contribute to the perpetuation of systemic violence are not fully addressed in his framework. The tropes of identity, power, and social inequality, which intersect with economic structures, also play a significant role in shaping the nature of new xenophobia. Thus, while Khair offers an essential economic perspective on new xenophobia, his analysis leaves unexplored the vast terrain of social and political dynamics that amplify systemic violence.

This chapter is an extension and a diversion of Khair's assertion that new xenophobia predominantly prevails in First World countries, particularly in affluent welfare states (2016, 7). Therefore, this study attempts to do an extensive reading of new xenophobia, which is not confined only to highly capitalist societies but can manifest in various forms and contexts across different countries, including those in the Global South, particularly India. The chapter argues that while high capitalism certainly contributes to the rise of new xenophobia, it is not the sole factor. A range of social tropes—such as religion, caste, race, and language—also play critical roles in perpetuating systemic violence through new xenophobia in the global South.

Chapter four, ***Narrativisation of Violence in Khair's Novels: The Thing About Thugs and Jihadi Jane,*** takes a critical look at how language is inherently limited and incomplete in its ability to fully convey meaning through linguistic expressions (Khair, 2012), highlighting a critical aspect of language and its role as a symbol rather than a mere vehicle of direct and raw confrontation. As a narrative construct, the human body is subject to diverse interpretations, which can transform its identity through different forms of narrativisation. This process can indeed instigate violence by rendering abstract concepts into literal manifestations. One of the ways this violence works is through the trope of heroism or glorification when intertwined with fundamental and radical narratives, can propagate violence in various societies that encourage individuals to perpetrate violence by normalising and valorising suffering. Such violence often comes with an aesthetic appeal masking the inherent hegemonic violence wherein individuals consent to their own suffering under the guise of religious or ideological duty, where the perpetrator simultaneously becomes a victim of their own violent actions. By exploring the complex relationship between language and systemic violence, this chapter examines how language manifests violence through glorification, thingification/objectification, or symbolic narrativisation in Khair's novels, *The Thing About Thugs* and

Jihadi Jane. This study highlights the intersection between language and violence, revealing the profound impact of narrativisation on personal and collective suffering. The chapter begins with an analysis of Zizek's provocative question, "What if humans exceed in their capacity for violence precisely because they speak?" (2008, 61) pointing to a connection between language and violence. There is an inherent inadequacy of language to encapsulate human experience entirely, making language a site of tension where intention and meaning often fail, echoing Hans Christian Andersen's sentiment that 'music comes in when words fail.'

There is a kind of "Occidentalism" as the counter to Said's Orientalism (Zizek 2008, 60), which works as a template of Eastern narration to counter the Western discourse. Zizek's notion of "Occidentalism" offers a critical framework for understanding the Eastern narrativisation of the West as a means of opposing dominant Western discourses. This reverse essentialism is employed by those who perceive themselves as the victims of Western imperialism and cultural hegemony. Occidentalism critically illuminates how counter-narratives can perpetuate the same essentializing logic that Orientalism critiques. Focusing on the narrativisation of violence, this chapter explores how we, in the articulation of identity or self, can serve to justify or legitimise acts of violence. This process of narrative construction enables the perpetration of violence by embedding it within socially and historically contingent frameworks. Therefore, the act of narrating violence involves not only the representation of violent acts but also the cultural and discursive forces that sanction or condemn them, complicating the storytelling process in the legitimation of perpetuation. Individuals often seek meaning and humanity with their bodies, striving to attach significance to their physical forms. However, the innate nature of one's narrative for one's body reveals the inherent meaninglessness at the core of existence—a notion akin to Conrad's depiction of the universe's indifference. Giti Chandra argues that "such a movement away from meaning into meaninglessness becomes the source of

fear" (2008, 9). This fear is effectively manipulated by those in positions of power, characters such as Lord Batterstone in *The Thing About Thugs* and Hejjiye and Hassan in *Jihadi Jane,* by exploiting this existential dread to generate a potent narrative force. In doing so, they harness terror to shape and control others.

This terror is particularly acute when society dismisses or overlooks the pain embedded within religious or traditional narratives that justify violence. By neglecting to theorise or address the pain perpetuated by these narratives, society allows for a deeper enactment of violence—marked by the failure to express or comprehend the pain caused by violence wholly—that further complicates how narratives of identity, faith, and tradition perpetuate harm, creating a cyclical relationship between language, violence, and the body. To comprehend this interplay between violence (pain) and language (articulation), Scarry's assertion is important that "physical pain does not simply resist language; it actively destroys it" (1985, 4). This assertion highlights that an individual typically engages in a unitary relationship with their body, wherein the person serves as the signifier and their body signified. However, as Chandra articulates, this relationship is irrevocably disrupted when the body is subjected to violence (24). This chapter concludes how literary tropes employed by the writer to narrate violence from imagination/symbolism can transform into factual as we cannot deny its literal facticity, which can influence the perpetration of violence in some societies because of its literary imagination used by writers in texts, that 'victims struggle to avoid these ideologies and structures as it becomes their literal truth' (Chandra, 3). So, such truths coming from the fictional worlds need dismantling and deconstructing.

Chapter five, ***Home and Belongingness: A Representation and Dislocation of Home in Khair's Novels: The Bus Stopped and Filming: A Love Story,*** foregrounds Khair's two novels, *The Bus Stopped* and *Filming: A Love Story,* examining the concepts of home, representation, dislocations

and its non-belongingness leading to systemic violence, focusing on the discourses of Indian nationalism and national identity through the lens of third space of Khair in comparison of Bhabha's. This chapter explores how many poor people in India do not have a permanent home and have to live in a different kind of third space, which is far more precarious and complicated than Bhabha's notion of third space in postcolonial studies. The chapter begins by analysing how mobility and migration have fundamentally changed the conceptualisation of "home" and its sense of belongingness. Home is no longer understood as a fixed and stable geographic location but is increasingly seen as a temporary and impermanent created by the movement of individuals across borders. As individuals move between multiple spatial, cultural, and political environments, home boundaries are redrawn, often resulting in fragmented or hybrid identities. This process complicates the idea of belonging, as a home becomes not only a place of origin or residence but also an emotional and symbolic space continually redefined by displacement, adaptation, and the negotiation of new social and cultural landscapes. Thus, the shifting mobility and migration necessitate a rethinking of home, positioning it as an ever-evolving site of belonging.

There is a massive gap between the living styles of rural and urban people in contemporary India. How people live in a country is vital to a modern nation and its nationalism. Khair says, 'houses do not make homes' because the concept of home varies according to the socio-economic conditions. Those poor who do not have permanent homes constantly migrate from one place to another, mostly making a temporary one-night stand for home, but unfortunately, their journey becomes permanent. That makes their existence neither inside nor outside society, creating a different kind of third space, but far more precarious than Bhabha's notion of third space. The concept of third space in Khair's novels is far less empowering than Bhabha's. This chapter also analyses how home is an illusion, not a permanent place that constantly changes like a dream and never gets

concretised in Khair's novels. In terms of home and belongingness, home is a temporary and precarious arrangement for many poor people in India. A significant portion of the population does geographic mobility, not by choice, but as a survival strategy. Poverty compels constant travel in search of work and sustenance, creating a form of displacement that disrupts the sense of belonging and national identity.

While the international diaspora is often characterised by voluntary mobility, shaped by modern consciousness and recognition, intra-national migration in India is primarily driven by poverty and hunger, forcing individuals to move for survival. This distinction highlights the divergent experiences of mobility within the "third space," as theorised by Bhabha and explored in Khair's works. In the international context, movement is frequently a matter of choice, whereas in the intra-national context, particularly in India, it is an imposed necessity. Khair's depiction of this forced mobility reflects a critique of the socio-economic conditions that marginalise the poor and uproot them from any stable sense of home, drawing attention to the unequal experiences of belonging within different forms of displacement. The chapter argues that while Bhabha's conceptualisation of borders operates within a national framework, Khair's portrayal of borders is more elusive and regionally specific. Consequently, the third space articulated in Khair's works presents a far more problematic existence for those inhabiting it than Bhabha's postcolonial third space. This critical perspective underscores the limitations of Bhabha's framework when applied to the realities of regional displacement, suggesting that the complexities of identity in Khair's narratives necessitate a revaluation of the constructs of hybridity and belonging within contemporary postcolonial discourse. Displacement fundamentally undermines the rootedness of a nation, mainly when it affects impoverished populations, their homes, and their sense of belonging. Such disruptions pose significant challenges to the cohesion of national identity.

Chapter six, *Conclusion*: The thesis concludes with a brief overview of the chapters, followed by each chapter's research objectives and findings. This study enlarges the scope of IEF in terms of its genre and a lens to read fiction. This thesis establishes a new trajectory and style of contemporary IEF, as Khair's fiction does not fit either in the postcolonial or popular literary genres—that this thesis terms "popular postcolonial fiction", bringing a fresh, distinctive voice. This study makes a critical move to explore the genre of fiction and its intersection in its style and theory. Through the textual analysis of the six primary texts, this thesis demonstrates the intersectionality of identity and violence in Khair's fiction. There is a need to study Khair as an intersectional writer and how his works are relevant to the contemporary world where he emerges as a significant voice in IEF, skilfully bridging the realms of popular and literary fiction while addressing the nuanced complexities of identity, culture, and postcolonial struggles. His narratives, layered with historical consciousness and contemporary relevance, challenge hegemonic structures and interrogate the politics of race, religion, and migration. His novels showcase a remarkable ability to weave wit with gravity, offering critical insights into global and Indian societal structures and a need to bring IEL to the global level without the postcolonial emblem.

Khair's thematic depth reflects a sustained engagement with marginalisation, hybridity, and the human condition. Khair's oeuvre is not merely reflective but transformative, marking him as a writer who will shape the contours of IEL for years to come. The concluding chapter includes my interview with Tabish Khair, which is conducted as part of my doctoral work, titled "Literature and thinking about the world in the post-pandemic era: An interview with Tabish Khair", to indicate Khair's reflections about his works and how he is looking forward to seeing literature in the future.

Chapter 2

Embracing the Contrasts: Tabish Khair and Popular Postcolonial Fiction

> You gotta dig a little on the ground you think you're standing on so you can actually see that much of what you take for granted in society is actually layers upon layers of inequalities that have allowed for a baseline that's fundamentally unequal.
>
> ~Kimberle Crenshaw (Interview, 2020)

2.1 Introduction

As a dominant genre, the novel has attracted significant scholarly and creative attention in the 21st century, with an increased focus on its evolving narrative forms and stylistic diversity. Indian English fiction (IEF) encapsulates a range of literary techniques and genres, reflecting a fusion of complex themes and global perspectives where India's robust English-language publishing market has a great hand. This burgeoning readership fosters a union where the distinction between literary and popular fiction is increasingly blurred. The genre of fiction has undergone transformative shifts due to literary movements such as modernism, postmodernism, colonialism, and postcolonialism. Tabish Khair's novels distinctly reflect the influences of both postcolonial and postmodern thought; however, his works are marked by a distinctive rural sensibility and stylistic innovations that distinguish them from his contemporaries in IEF. Unlike many authors who adhere to a singular narrative mode, Khair continually experiments with new literary forms in each novel, resulting in a body of work that defies rigid classification and broadens the scope of Indian contemporary fiction.

In the context of postmodernism, the traditional boundary between genres has diminished, driven by shifting public tastes, widespread acceptance, and the expanding demand for English novels. Nonetheless, a critical divide persists within scholarly circles between literary fiction—especially postcolonial works that interrogate historical, cultural, and

political narratives— and popular fiction— which is mostly commercially oriented and often caters to broader entertainment values. This distinction remains a focal point for academic inquiry, with particular interest in how postcolonial fiction articulates nuanced perspectives on identity, power, violence and resistance. From the early 1990s, when postcolonial studies began to gain recognition as a distinct area of academic inquiry, until 2007, the study of novels, particularly in writing and reading practices, emerged as a dominant genre in Indian English literature (IEL) (Menon 2020, 1). The trajectory of IEF has undergone a significant transformation, particularly following the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), a pivotal work in both postcolonial and postmodern literature. Postmodernist and postcolonial aesthetics have since profoundly influenced the narrative techniques and thematic preoccupations of Indian English novels. This shift is evident in adopting narrative forms such as magical realism, structural 'bagginess,' non-linear storytelling, and hybridised language, trends often associated with post-Rushdie Indian fiction (Chaudhuri, 2004). The rise of these techniques also raises questions regarding the canonicity of IEL, challenging traditional genre classifications and opening new avenues for literary exploration.

This chapter analyses Khair's *The Bus Stopped* (2004) and *Filming: A Love Story* (2007) through an intersectional approach to find how his novels occupy a liminal space, situated in a 'noman's land' that do not fit into the genre of either popular or literary fiction in Indian postcolonial literature. I argue that Khair inhabits a liminal space, putting him in the genre of "Popular postcolonial fiction." This thesis attempts to define it as 'a genre of fiction that incorporates elements from both literary and popular traditions yet resists adherence to the conventions of either, occupying a liminal space beyond established generic boundaries.' This chapter explores how Tabish Khair fits within this evolving literary landscape, focusing specifically on the writing styles and thematic concerns of popular and literary postcolonial IEF. It situates Khair's work within these broader

debates, considering how his novels reflect and complicate the prevailing conventions of postcolonial fiction. This chapter situates Khair as an 'in-between' or 'hybrid' writer, challenging traditional genre classifications and reexamining conventional categorisations within the canon of contemporary IEL. Tabish Khair's literary corpus exemplifies a complex interplay between postcolonial and postmodern influences, creating a liminal space and giving him a distinct voice within contemporary IEF. He transcends the rigid boundaries of genre classification, demonstrating a fluidity that allows a multifaceted exploration of themes and styles. Khair's writing creates a local niche that resonates internationally, distinguishing him from his contemporaries. Unlike commercially successful popular authors such as Chetan Bhagat or Amish Tripathi, whose narratives cater primarily to popular tastes, Khair's fiction does not conform to the conventions of popular fiction. At the same time, his novels do not align entirely with the artistic rigour typically associated with literary figures like Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy or Salman Rushdie.

2.2 Khair's Place as a writer in Indian English Literature (IEL)

Tabish Khair is a prominent transnational Indian English writer who embodies a multifaceted identity as a novelist, an academic, a poet, and a political commentator residing in Denmark. His literary oeuvre spans various genres, including novels, poetry, nonfiction, and travelogues; however, his novels are set in many countries; they are rooted or connected somehow in India and the Indian framework, especially the rural setting of his birthplace, Gaya. Like R. K. Narayan's 'Malgudi', Khair creates a fictional town, 'Phansa,' near Gaya, which serves as a backdrop or string for his works. This locale serves as a thematic connective thread in all his novels. Khair's novels grapple with a wide range of themes, with violence and identity crises serving as the main themes. Other themes include pressing social issues such as migration, identity conflicts, fundamentalism, violence, xenophobia, anti-colonial discourse, alienation, globalisation, multiculturalism, class conflict, racism, and ethnicity. The influences of

both postcolonial and popular literary frameworks are evident in his narratives; however, categorising Khair as a writer within a singular literary framework is complex. He has consistently resisted self-identification within any specific genre, as reflected in various interviews and statements that underscore his reluctance to conform to conventional literary categorisations.

In his essay, *A Blessing for My Children,* Khair articulates his disillusionment with the postcolonial discourse in literature that primarily addresses the dichotomy of the "West-and-the-Rest" (Verma 2008, 4). He critiques this approach for its limited scope, suggesting that much acclaimed postcolonial literature often neglects the intricacies of lived experiences. Khair believes that people can imbibe Western education and speak English in any civilised and modern society without losing a sense of their own other sources of rational thinking and possible modernities (Verma, 4). Furthermore, Dwivedi characterises Khair as a writer of social responsibility, noting that he "emerges as a liberalist, […] more accurately a humanist, and for this reason, he always refuses to bracket his works under the rubrics of colonialism/postcolonialism studies" (2013, 13). Through these perspectives, it is easy to view Khair's literary contributions as an exploration of the complexities of intersectional identities, violence, social justice, and the multifaceted realities of contemporary societies, transcending the limitations of traditional literary frameworks.

As an Indian English writer, Khair states, "Muslim is not the only thing I can call myself. And yet over the years, I have had my nose rubbed into this one 'identity' more often than I wish to recall" (Verma 2008, Intro.), positioning him as a marginal outsider within both literary and social contexts. Consequently, Khair finds himself in a bracket that complicates his identity to be perceived as a universal writer. However, he never accepted this bracket or any social boundaries, as his writings hardly follow any fixed genres. Elisabetta Marino argues that "Khair's creative *oeuvre*

aims at dismantling any sort of dangerous binarism, and hence, Khair's works cannot be bracketed within any particular genre" (*Tabish Khair: A Critical Companion*, 2013, 15). In an interview with Prabir Purkayastha, the editor-in-chief of *Newsclick*, Khair elaborates on the theme of *Negotiating Multiple Identities*, articulates the challenges and nuances associated with his status as an Indian English writer, reflecting on the interplay between his cultural heritage and the external perceptions that shape his identity in the globalised world where classification mostly oversimplifies the richness of individual experience, as he says—

> In many ways, I feel I have grown up as part of different minorities, also as a writer, as a creative writer, because I grew up in a small place called Gaya in Bihar. I was educated there. I did my Master's from Bihar, from Gaya, not even Patna or Ranchi. And I think I am probably the only internationally published Indian English writer who not only grew up in a small town but was educated there. So, in a sense, I was, and I am, part of a minority. I don't belong to the kind of group to which Arundhati Roy or Vikram Seth, or Salman Rushdie belong (Purkayastha, 2010).

By saying that, Khair is consciously distancing himself from the postcolonial writers. He points out the necessity of acknowledging the complexities of his intersectional identity as this negotiation of identity enriches Khair's writing and contributes to broader discussions concerning the intersections of culture, religion, and belonging, providing him with a vantage point to engage deeply with the nuances of marginalised Indian communities. Khair has intimately engaged with diverse Indian society, mainly through his experiences in the rural areas of Gaya, where he has observed its inherent rural beauty and social challenges. This perspective enables him to depict the intrinsic beauty and the entrenched social injustices of these communities, offering a vivid and unflinching portrayal of the downtrodden segments of Indian society, foregrounding the

complexities and contradictions that characterise their lived realities. His novels— *Filming* (2007), *The Bus Stopped* (2001), and *Night of Happiness* (2018)— vividly depict these dualities, capturing the rural complexities of Indian life by presenting both its positive and negative aspects through his nuanced portrayal, fostering a deeper understanding of the societal dynamics. Dwivedi has commented, "[h]e is a socially responsible writer who writes not to entertain but to augment moral and ethical values in society" (2013, 13), as Khair posits his ambivalent relationship with his homeland by stating, "There is much I am proud of India, and there is much I am ashamed of" (Verma, 26). This acknowledgement underpins his critical engagement with Indian society, highlighting a dual consciousness that embraces both admiration and critique.

In *Babu Fictions* (2001), Khair argues that contemporary IEF, particularly in its most successful versions, is predominantly written by the privileged Babu class. He asserts that there is an alienation in contemporary IEF, that this alienation pervades the literary landscape, resulting from the pronounced divide between the Babu class and the Coolie (subaltern) class (2001, x)—

> This 'line of division' between Babu and Coolie is marked across socio-economic and discursive (even linguistic) maps. 'Babus' are middle or upper class, mostly urban (at times cosmopolitan), Brahminized and/or 'westernised', and fluent in English. The Coolie classes, on the other hand, are non-English speaking, not or significantly 'westernised', not or less Brahminized, economically deprived, culturally marginalised and, often, rural or migrant-urban populations (2001, ix).

Khair's perspective on writing is inherently 'Glocal' as he aims to foster an awareness of the dichotomy between the 'local' and the 'international,' where the 'local' encompasses the concepts of India, Indianness, and Indian literature, whereas the 'international' pertains to the affectations associated

with postcolonial discourse. In the introduction of *Babu Fictions*, Khair suggests that "[o]ne can see this book as a bid to address Indian English texts without mutilating them to fit 'postcolonial' paradigms" (2001, x). Khair wants to highlight the complexities inherent in postcolonial writing, inviting a critical examination of how language and cultural context shape literary narratives. Khair critiques postcolonial literature as fundamentally incomplete or '*not* a filler' that cannot be applied in all societies, pointing out that it does not merely fill a vacuum or replicate the past. However, it carves out its own space within the narrative landscape, selectively recounting certain stories while omitting others (2001, xi). Such selective narration results in the marginalisation of narratives that struggle to be articulated within the dominant medium (language) employed (xi).

K. Satchidanandan highlights three critical dangers identified by scholars in his article *REFLECTION: The Post-Colonial Question*, which includes the "[s]tandardisation and leveling of differences," the "neglect of literatures written in different languages other than English," and the "reductionism in terms of other social issues in India, where decolonisation is viewed as the singular major issue in post-independence life". Echoing Khair's perspective, Satchidanandan emphasises the importance of grappling with other pressing social issues in India, such as poverty, ill-health, communalism, casteism, patriarchy, consumerism, ecological devastation, moral corruption in positions of power, overgeneralization, balkanization, and terrorism. These challenges, he argues, are not solely products of colonisation, although colonial legacies have exacerbated many of these conditions (Satchidanandan 1996, 5-6). Through these discussions, both Khair and Satchidanandan advocate for other significant socio-political aspects in India, calling for a critical engagement with the complexities that define postcolonial realities beyond the confines of colonial discourse.

The writing styles and narratives of the English language play a pivotal role in shaping the literature and reflecting Indian realities and narratives in IEL. Khair argues that 'English literature not only encompasses Indian English literature but also engages with India's broader socio-cultural realities and narratives' (2001, ix). The linguistic limitations that arise when attempting to express Indian experiences through the medium of English should, therefore, be a central concern in analysing contemporary IEF. As Spivak argues, language comes with its own cultural semiotics (Spivak 2004); Khair living in rural India mostly and then in Denmark, instead of living in major cosmopolitan cities or moving to London or New York as other writers, also affected Khair's writing and his visibility as an Indian author in world academia. Charles Lock (2013) rightly points out Khair's presence among Indian writers.

> London has long been the place where every Indian writer (in English) aspires to be published; Britain is a place where middle-class Indians have long felt at home. That Khair had been living in Denmark for some years before he ever went to Britain is a deviation from the conventional path that distinguishes him from other Indian writers, and that gives his work an unusual shape, in terms of both theme and audience (Dwivedi, 10).

The challenge of narrating in English, a language often associated with colonial legacy and elite discourse, highlights these works' inherent tension between form and content. Indian English writers, many of whom belong to the socio-cultural elite, often referred to as the 'Babu' class, engage with language in ways that reflect their privileged backgrounds, drawing upon their linguistic and cultural heritage. Their use of language often embodies a kind of literary aesthetic that echoes Samuel Taylor Coleridge's notion of 'the best words in the best order.' This aesthetic, symptomatic of what has been termed 'Babu fiction,' reflects the writers' mastery over language, a literary technique and a marker of class identity,

underscoring the socio-linguistic divide between the 'Babu' and subaltern classes. These authors consciously use language to navigate the tension between their elite status and the complexities of representing subaltern experiences, raising critical questions about whose voices are heard and whose experiences are marginalised due to the linguistic barriers imposed by the English language.

For example, in *The God of Small Things* (1997), Arundhati Roy's portrayal of Velutha, the 'untouchable' labourer from the oppressed Paravan caste, is complex yet limited, underscoring the brutal social hierarchies and systemic erasure of marginalised voices. While Velutha is central to the novel's conflict and embodies a radical challenge to caste norms through his relationship with Ammu, Roy's characterisation simultaneously restricts his agency and voice. Velutha is seen primarily through the perspectives of Ammu, other characters, and the narrator rather than through his own internal monologue, rendering him largely silent within the text. Though Roy imbues him with qualities that transcend his social position— an adeptness at his craft, kindness, and revolutionary courage— his portrayal falls short of authenticity. The tragic consequences of his forbidden love with Ammu— his unjust accusation, brutal punishment, and eventual death— serve to amplify the oppressive structures he challenges and underline his voicelessness within these power dynamics. By casting Velutha as a symbolic, almost sacrificial figure within the caste conflict, Roy risks reducing him to a plot device within Ammu's story rather than granting him the narrative space and agency of a fully realised character. It raises questions about the accessibility of these narratives to non-elite voices and how language can both empower and marginalise them. The complex relationship between language, class, and narrative in IEF is thus a key area for critical exploration.

Khair's deliberate departure from 'Babu fiction' reflects his resistance to being constrained by the linguistic and narrative expectations

associated with this tradition. By consciously distancing himself from the standard or 'Babu' language, Khair opens his work to a broader audience, transcending the limitations imposed by the elitist conventions of IEF. His discomfort with this standard language is evident in his fiction and nonfiction, where he challenges the hegemonic dominance of a polished, Anglicised literary form. His personal and cultural background shapes Khair's unusual approach to writing. Having spent the first thirty years of his life in India, much of it in a small city during his formative college years, he developed a distinct literary style reflecting his marginality within Indian society and global literary circles. His displacement to Denmark at age thirty further influenced his cosmopolitan yet locally grounded sensibility, setting him apart from many of his contemporaries in IEL. Khair's distinctive writing style involves the integration of English and Indian phrases, which allows him to evoke the sensibility of rural and marginalised communities. His use of language— from colloquial expressions to specific cultural references— reflects his deep connection to local identities while engaging with broader, international literary forms. His first novel, *An Angel in Pyjamas*, garnered critical attention early in his career, with *India Today* praising it as "[t]he calling card of a writer with the power to fascinate" (1995).

In his fiction, *The Bus Stopped* and *Filming*, Khair employs linguistic hybridity, weaving Indian vernacular and English phrases together that capture the complexities of social hierarchies and regional cultures. For instance, in *The Bus Stopped*, phrases such as—sahab, bibis and babus (3), Brahmjoni (5), eating from pattals (19), chokkra-assistants (21), gup-sup (24), palm-leaf fan (33), driver's father's road (35), dehaati cooking (39), gitpit English (41), lungi-clad rickshaw puller (52), firangistan (59), naami man (72), Home-burk-shomeburk (88), many-many hour (101), a two-cowrie woman (110), hair-clipped masterni (127), decorum-cliped doctorni (127), fly-sucking skinflint (141), tribal thickheadedness (166), bigtownsman (167), tilkut of narration (187)— emphasize the cultural and

social nuances of rural and urban Indian life; while in *Filming*, expressions like— namaste'ed (12), helpers-whelpers (13), two-cowrie nautanki (23), mai-baap (23), well-oiled lathis (24), Bombaywalli mausi (30), madamssaar (81), no jaan, no dum (85)— continue this thematic exploration. This linguistic strategy highlights Khair's glocal perspective and rootedness in rural India, which positions him as a writer capable of making local narratives resonate internationally. Khair's commitment to realism stems from his provincial upbringing, and his connection to his roots is evident in his fiction and nonfiction. Khair writes about his belongingness and provincial perspective in a local magazine, *Daffodils in Gaya*, articulating that his refusal to sanitise the realities of rural India positions him as a writer who is, in many ways, true to life. He says—

> It was only when I started teaching literature in bigger cities, especially in the West, that I realised that I had grown up as a cosmopolitan in a provincial town in what was then called -and probably still is- the 'most backward and crime-ridden state of India'. Wordsworth's daffodils never presented a problem to me (and my classmates) though I had never seen a daffodil (there was no TV...) and I even managed, as I graduated to (local) college, to read the Russian classics without bothering to decipher a samovar (Khair 2016).

Khair's writings show a noticeable departure from the Anglo-Indian speech patterns often associated with IEF. Unlike writers such as R.K. Narayan, who employed a Brahminized[2] form of English, or Raja Rao, whose works feature a Sanskritized English[3], Khair renounces these linguistic traditions. Instead, he crafts a language that reflects his commitment to depicting rural life and a more inclusive Indian experience.

[2] Brahminized form of English is kind of English which is influenced or affected by Brahminical texts in Hinduism or the use of English language which is syncretized or aligned to Brahmanical religion (Hindu) in terms of caste or class.

[3] Sanskritized form of English is the kind of English which is affected or influenced by a change of word, phrase or language to match the characteristics of Sanskrit, or the use of Sanskrit terms in English language without translating or altering the original meaning.

To underscore this rural rootedness, Khair creates the fictional city of "Phansa" in his novels, highlighting the non-metropolitan, rural India that forms the backdrop of his narratives. Khair's distinctiveness as a postcolonial author is evident in his approach to societal issues without indulging in exoticising the Orient or its people. As Dwivedi notes, "[h]is strength lies in the fact that unlike other postcolonial authors, he does not exoticise the Orientals, but instead provides an alternative to his reader to cover the idea of humanity and world in which they live" (2013, 13). Rather than perpetuating stereotypes or romanticising the colonial encounter, Khair offers a more nuanced and humanistic portrayal of postcolonial realities by engaging in a critical yet grounded perspective that resists simplification or exoticization, carving out a space in IEF that emphasises local specificity while engaging with global concerns. As a novelist, Khair is also a sharp critic and poet, and the benefit can be seen in his writing of novels. In *The Streets of My Poem*, he says-

> In all my poems I simply walk the streets of my town once again;
>
> Unable to leave behind men and women pitching tar
>
> On the hot roads muscles straining in the sun;
>
> Unable to forget that old bagger sleeping in the shade.

Khair diverges from postmodernism's ontological scepticism, aiming instead to depict impoverished lives with a level of genuine concern that postmodernism often resists. He asserts that writers must maintain an awareness of their presence in their work to engage readers effectively. This self-awareness allows for a deeper connection between the text and the audience. However, his novels distinctly reflect the influences of both postcolonial and postmodern literature, where his approach balances a postmodern awareness, giving his work a distinctive voice that engages and critiques postmodernist ideas. Within this evolving literary landscape, his works deconstruct and complicate the prevailing conventions of postcolonial fiction.

2.3 Postcolonialism and Postmodernism: Changing Perspectives of Contemporary IEF

The term 'postcolonial' originally referred to the period following the formal end of colonial rule. However, within academic discourse, particularly in postcolonial studies, its scope has broadened to signify a critical, interdisciplinary framework that interrogates modes of resistance, subversion, and identity formation within cultural practices, both during and after colonial rule (Chaudhuri and Boehmer 2011, 1). Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Albert Memmi, and Mahatma Gandhi remain seminal figures within postcolonial literature for their critiques of colonialism and explorations of resistance. However, the theoretical underpinnings of postcolonial discourse were primarily shaped by the triad of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha— often regarded as the 'holy trinity' of postcolonial theory in Young's *White Mythologies*. This shift marked a significant expansion of postcolonial studies, extending its analytic scope and interpretive methods, as Chinua Achebe contends that the primary objective of postcolonial studies is to disrupt Eurocentric perceptions of the world. Writing from a perspective external to postcolonial studies can sometimes produce "a more nuanced understanding of the postcolonial than from within the field" (Chaudhuri and Boehmer 2011, 10), enriching postcolonial discourse by incorporating diverse perspectives as Khair's fiction somehow brings this diversification.

Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) and Bill Ashcroft's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) provided foundational insights into the emergence of Postcolonial literature as a prominent field of academic inquiry, particularly within the Global South. Ashcroft defines postcolonial as encompassing "all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day," underscoring the field's broad historical and cultural scope. In this context, postcolonial novels serve as vehicles for challenging and subverting the enduring impacts of colonial violence, domination and the different dynamics of power and

representation across cultures and histories. Said interrogates how Orientalism constructed a dichotomy between the Occident and the Orient, critiquing the instrumental role of European discourse in producing an Orientalist imaginary that sustains colonial dominance. Initially, the focus of postcolonial literature was to offer counter-narratives against imperialism's cultural and material hegemony. Over time, it evolved into a critical tool for examining the ideological frameworks that sustained colonial rule, enabling a deeper understanding of the processes of cultural subjugation and resistance within colonised societies.

In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1998), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critically interrogates whether individuals on the margins—the subaltern—can speak for their own experiences and interests; she concludes they cannot as they lack this agency because intellectuals and postcolonial critics often assume the role of speaking on their behalf. She critiques such interventions, including certain feminist attempts to 'give voice' to the silenced others, arguing that even these ostensibly benevolent efforts unintentionally perpetuate the very silencing they seek to rectify. Spivak's contribution to postcolonial theory significantly challenges the binary of self and other. She warns against the essentialization and homogenization of subaltern groups, arguing that they cannot be encompassed under a single category of "Other" due to their complex and ambiguous relationship to power structures. Instead, she asserts, "the colonised subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (Leitch and Cain 1999), underscoring the subaltern's inherent identity, diversity, and unrepresentability.

Postcolonialism addresses economic and cultural inequalities experienced by nations across three non-Western continents –Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Postcolonial literature, therefore, holds prominence in regions formerly subject to colonial rule. McLeod observes that "[t]he literatures of nations such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Kenya, India, Pakistan, Jamaica, and Ireland have been called

'postcolonial'" (2016, 3). Postcolonial studies, as a critical discipline, is inherently disruptive as it "disturbs the order of the world" and "threatens privilege and power" (Young 2003, 7). Tabish Khair recognises this disruptive potential and avoids reductive views on the writer's role in postcolonial contexts. Postcolonial fiction scrutinises colonial legacies, particularly in terms of cultural hegemony. It actively challenges imperialism's persistent influence over national identity and the cultural autonomy of previously colonised societies. Consequently, postcolonial novelists engage in the appropriation of colonial languages, the critique of metanarratives[4], the re-examination of colonial discourse, and the rewriting of history. Themes of decolonisation, nationalism, cultural identity, counter-discourse, and the subversion of stereotypes are central to this literature. As Amit Chaudhuri argues,

> The postcolonial novel becomes a trope for an ideal hybrid by which the West celebrates not so much Indian, whatever that infinitely complex thing is, but its own historical quest, its reinterpretation of itself" (2004, 30).

The advent of the 21st century has introduced evolving colonial and imperial structures, prompting us to question the ongoing relevance of postcolonial studies. Critics suggest that internal contradictions, such as the tensions between hybridity and nationalism, diaspora and indigeneity, as well as materialist and poststructuralist approaches, have weakened the coherence of the field (Chaudhuri and Boehmer 2011, 1-2). Spivak has cautioned that postcolonial studies may risk devolving into a mere "alibi" for specific political or historical agendas if not within a broader, comparative framework (Chaudhuri and Boehmer, 1-2). Moreover, as Chaudhuri and Boehmer observe, "postcolonial studies is a field constructed almost exclusively in terms of academic specialisation: born in

[4] Metanarrative or grand narrative is a term developed by Jean-Francois Lyotard to mean a theory that tries to give a totalizing, all-encompassing theme, big picture that unites all smaller themes and individual stories.

the academy, it is produced by the academy and for the academy" (2011, 7). This institutionalisation has raised concerns regarding the field's accessibility and relevance beyond academic settings. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason and Other Works,* Spivak again warns against the danger of "reverse ethnocentrism," a tendency that could reinforce rather than dismantle essentialist views (Chaudhuri and Boehmer, 7). This critique shows the importance of expanding postcolonial studies to address evolving global power dynamics, thereby ensuring their critical utility in interrogating contemporary forms of imperialism.

As Dr Menon (2020) observes, the continuous frictions, collisions, and interactions within literary and theoretical discourses enrich the field's scholarship as writers push the boundaries of established traditions. In this context, Khair's work can be seen as an intervention within the broader discourse of contemporary IEL, where he rejects easy categorisation and rigid narratives. By transcending conventional boundaries, Khair's writing creates a 'third space', a liminal zone that blends elements of both popular and literary traditions while offering something distinctly new. Postcolonial theory has expanded to include partition studies and comparative studies. Still, many scholars, critics and writers— like Arif Dirlik, Aijaz Ahmad, Neil Larsen, and Benita Parry— have pointed to the narrow base of postcolonial literary theory and criticism. Indian postcolonial literature should not stick with the same themes of the West versus the rest, as they can explore new themes and different perspectives. India is full of diversity, regardless of race, language, space, or place, so there is a need for different representations and decentralisation of the same themes and ideas.

Postmodernism generally refers to the art, literature, and cultural movements emerging after World War II, a period marked by disillusionment and constant threats of war. The horrors of totalitarianism, mass genocide, nuclear devastation, and environmental degradation led many to question the foundations of Western thought, including long-held

beliefs in progress, unity, and rationality. In literature, postmodernism challenges these foundational structures, seeking to deconstruct traditional narrative forms and rejecting established conventions regarding coherence and grand narrative structure. Postmodern literature characteristically subverts traditional boundaries, challenging hierarchical distinctions between the high and low cultures, blending cultural forms and favouring fragmented, non-linear storytelling and celebrating ambiguity and playfulness that values plurality and fluidity over cohesive narrative structures (Nayar 2009). It reconfigures traditional approaches to narrative structure, form, and the reader's role by simultaneously embracing different perspectives and questioning established norms and structures.

Influenced by theorists like Lyotard, Derrida, and Baudrillard, postmodern literature often incorporates metafiction, a device to use the self-referential mode of storytelling to create narratives that can deny objective truths, embracing a constructivist and relativistic understanding of identity and culture. This literature often engages with simulacra— described by Baudrillard— embracing the concept that what is represented can become more "real" than reality itself, and by doing so, postmodern works blur reality and imitation, casting doubts and questioning the authenticity of representation. Postmodern literature strives to deconstruct widely accepted views of humanity, society, and knowledge by integrating or subverting traditional and modern ideas within the same framework. This approach resists overarching narratives and universal theories, prioritising local truths and diverse perspectives (Lyotard 1465-1468). Additionally, postmodernism's rejection of grand narratives and its emphasis on subjectivity reflects a critical shift toward valuing localised, individual experiences over universal claims, opening a space for diverse voices and experiences to reshape literary forms.

Tabish Khair's fiction critically explores postmodern sensibilities within this framework, aligning his works with postmodernism's emphasis

on fragmentation and diversity, simultaneously challenging stable understandings of identity and cultural authenticity while calling into question grand narratives, whether historical, cultural, or ideological. Thus, His approach engages with postmodern concerns, bringing nuanced perspectives to cultural and philosophical destabilisation themes. Khair's work implicitly involves postmodern themes through its deconstruction of power dynamics, narrative authority, and cultural representation. However, Khair diverges from postmodernism's ontological scepticism, aiming instead to depict subaltern lives with a level of genuine concern that postmodernism mostly resists. His approach balances a postmodern awareness of the constructed nature of identity and experience with a realist commitment to address tangible societal issues, making his work a distinctive voice that engages and critiques postmodernist ideas.

2.4 Debates between Popular and Literary Fiction in IEL

Popular fiction, often called commercial or genre fiction, contrasts predominantly with literary fiction, prioritising emotional engagement and readability over artistic subtlety or experimental structure. While literary fiction may invite deeper aesthetic or critical analysis, which is frequently valued for contributing to cultural and intellectual discourses, popular fiction is primarily written for entertainment values and commercial gain. As Jameson posits, popular fiction fulfils an essential social function by providing readers with a 'narrative playground' to temporarily suspend their realities (1981). Popular fiction has a wide range of subcategories, including mystery, romance, fantasy, thriller and science fiction, each with its own tropes and audience expectations, making it an integral part of the contemporary publishing industry and an influential force in shaping cultural narratives. In contemporary publishing, popular literature has evolved significantly from its roots in folklore and oral storytelling traditions, mainly shaped by the commercial success of the modern publishing industry. Today, popular literature prioritises marketability and mass appeal, with bestsellers often adapted into mainstream media,

including Bollywood films, like *2 States* and *Kai Po Che!* The Industrial Revolution and the advent of the printing press also played transformative roles in developing popular literature, democratising access to books, expanding readership beyond the elite classes, and reshaping cultural perceptions of storytelling.

Therefore, popular fiction is frequently distinguished from literary fiction's reliance on abundant dialogue, rapid pacing, and a focus on accessibility and entertainment value, contrasting with the introspective depth and stylistic attention encompassed in literary fiction. Critics have often framed popular fiction as less committed to literary works' artistic rigour and nuanced narrative complexity. However, this perspective has been challenged and contested by scholars on popular literature who disagreed on the comparison of high/low or literary fiction is better than popular fiction by arguing that popular fiction's narrative strategies and stylistic conventions are sound and valid in its own ways, revealing complex cultural dynamics and societal concerns: Anjaria (2019), Varughese (2016), Gupta (2012), and Hasan (2014). They argue that Indian popular fiction should not be dismissed merely as commercial or inferior fiction; instead, it provides insight into contemporary India's diverse social and cultural landscapes, often resonating with readers through themes of modernity, tradition, and social transformation. Therefore, the distinction between popular and literary fiction mirrors broader societal shifts toward inclusivity and accessibility in the contemporary IEL.

E. Dawson Varughese introduced the concept of "Bharati Fantasy" in *Genre Fiction of New India* (2017) to describe the special qualities of contemporary Indian popular fiction. She contends that Indian commercial fiction adheres to specific conventions, including certain stylistic devices and narrative techniques, distinguishing it as a unique novel genre rather than an inferior counterpart to literary fiction. This perspective challenges the traditional Western academic views on fiction, which often overlook the cultural and narrative innovations within Indian genre fiction and view it

through a limited postcolonial lens (2017, 1). In *Reading India Now* (2019), Alka Anjaria examines contemporary ILF, going beyond the traditional boundaries of 'high' and 'low' forms of literature while bridging divides across linguistic categories. She argues that contemporary fiction must be understood on its own terms rather than through the established frameworks, which are often limited, risking the misinterpretation of contemporary works that engage with modern India in innovative ways, as these works are frequently seen in opposition to postcolonial concerns. Anjaria critiques that "when scholars read new texts, they do so through old lenses" (2019, 5).

By citing popular works by authors like Chetan Bhagat, Amish Tripathi, Durjoy Datta, Ravinder Singh, and Anuja Chauhan, Anjaria (2019) emphasises the prevalence of standard storytelling within India's literary market. So, Anjaria calls for a "reimagination" of IEF, advocating for emergent literary forms that respond to contemporary themes, arguing that Indian literature requires new discourses and literary forms that diverge from the conventional structures of the postcolonial novel to better reflect and engage with modern-day India's complexities and evolving narrative interests (2019, 28). However, the line distinguishing popular and literary fiction is increasingly fluid, shaped by evolving public interests and shifts in critical standards. William Shakespeare might have been classified as popular literature in his time had his works not transcended this category, becoming the esteemed foundational works of artistic literature today. Today, comic books, cartoon strips, and graphic novels have also been incorporated into popular literature, expanding the genre's reach and appeal across a broader spectrum of readers. This inclusivity and democratisation of popular literature signal a transformation in the literary marketplace while challenging conventional notions of literary prestige.

2.4.1 ***Discussion of Khair's "Popular Postcolonial Fiction"***

Postcolonial literature encompasses diverse works produced by writers from previously colonised nations and authors of minority diasporas

living in the West. In India, the discourse of postcolonialism found its initial foundation within the educated, English-speaking middle class; however, it was not limited to intellectual circles only as it resonated with broader communities, including tribal groups and peasant societies, who sought autonomy from colonial rule through anti-colonial discourses. Postcolonial novelists primarily engage with themes such as linguistic appropriation, metanarratives, colonial discourse, historical revision, struggles for decolonisation, and the articulation of national and cultural identity, challenging the dominant colonial narratives while valorising Indigenous cultural identities and fostering a counter-discourse dismantling stereotypes. After the success of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a novel that set the stage for new narrative forms and themes that interrogate colonial legacies and celebrate the postcolonial Indian identity, ILF underwent a transformative shift. Following Rushdie, authors like G.V. Desani, Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Anita Desai, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Chandra, and Jhumpa Lahiri and others emerged as critical voices, creating a body of work that portrays a multifaceted, lively and assertive India. These authors' works have catalysed a shift in global literary discourse, fostering a nuanced understanding of Indian postcolonial experiences through innovative narrative structures and thematic explorations that resonate with a broader, transnational audience.

Chaudhuri commented on the hybridised nature of postcolonial novels, suggesting how the West celebrates its own historical reflection rather than the hybrid ideal of India's 'infinitely complex' identity (2004). This viewpoint reinforces how postcolonial literature can simultaneously address local identities and serve as a mirror through which the West reinterprets itself. While the terms 'postcolonial' and 'popular' are often intertwined in the context of Indian English authors, they are not mutually exclusive. It is important to note that "popular" refers specifically to a literary genre, while "postcolonial" constitutes a broader field of inquiry

that extends beyond literature to encompass historical, cultural, and political dimensions (Said 1978). This distinction enhances the multifaceted nature of literature and its capacity to engage with various critical discourses. Postcolonial literature in India has frequently engaged with the dichotomy between postcolonial and popular literature, highlighting the complex interplay between these genres.

Within this framework, Tabish Khair's novels inhabit a unique space transcending conventional categorisation, existing in a liminal zone between postcolonial and postmodern fiction and between literary and popular fiction. His works often evoke a distinctive rural sensibility, characterised by innovative writing styles that set them apart from those of his contemporaries. Khair critiques the commercial pressures exerted on literary production, noting that literature has been "reduced by many publishers and editors to that which sells: a little like soap, but not as useful or—though Kindle has set out to change this—as convenient to pack" (Khair & Doubinsky 2011, 5). Khair's position as a writer defies conventional categorisation within established postcolonial literary genres as his novels resist easy classification, complicating the typical structures used to define postcolonial fiction. His works embody an 'in-between' or 'hybrid' identity, blending the characteristics of both literary and popular fiction elements while transcending traditional narrative frameworks. This resistance aligns with Chaudhuri's (2001) assertion that postcolonial narratives often serve as a vehicle for hybrid identities. This hybrid identity reflects broader trends within postcolonial literature, where authors primarily navigate complex cultural and linguistic landscapes. As Anjaria (2019) argues, contemporary Indian literature increasingly resists categorisation, challenging the binaries that have historically defined literary discourse (5). Similarly, Varughese (2017) argues that IEF today require new literary forms that move beyond traditional postcolonial narratives (1).

Khair's work embodies this evolution, blending elements of popular and literary fiction in ways that critique and expand the conventions of both genres. Moreover, Khair's narrative strategies and thematic concerns reflect a postmodern sensibility that undermines the coherence of grand narratives, allowing for a more nuanced representation of identity and culture. His reluctance to fit neatly into either popular or literary categories suggests an authorial intent to provoke thought and engage with the complexities of contemporary existence. This positioning challenges the notion of a singular literary identity in postcolonial contexts, contributing to a richer understanding of contemporary IEL in an increasingly globalised world. I argue that Khair inhabits a liminal space in the genre of "popular postcolonial fiction", which this study defines— "A Genre of fiction that incorporates elements from both literary and popular traditions yet resists adherence to the conventions of either, occupying a liminal space beyond established generic boundaries".

The writing of "popular postcolonial fiction" emphasises the uniformity between writers such as Salman Rushdie and Chetan Bhagat, whose works are widely accessible and often address the themes of national identity and cultural conflict. In this context, Khair's writing can be understood as similarly accessible to the average Indian English reader, placing him within popular literature. However, Khair's unsophisticated style is not simply a matter of readability— it serves as a medium through which deeper, more introspective explorations of human existence and suffering are conveyed, thus distinguishing him from purely commercial writers like Bhagat. While both Khair and Bhagat feature Indian love affairs in their narratives, Khair's treatment of these relationships is more reflective, often delving into the complexities of life and the emotional turmoil of marginalised individuals. This sets him apart from Bhagat, whose novels predominantly focus on campus life and contemporary urban settings, which, though engaging, often lack the socio-political depth found in Khair's work. This distinction highlights Khair's ability to blend popular

themes with critical postcolonial reflections, thus offering a nuanced critique of Indian society in local and transnational contexts.

2.5 Analysis of his Novels *The Bus Stopped* and *Filming: A Love Story*

This section examines Tabish Khair's distinctive writing styles and the portrayal of Indian cosmopolitan and rural societies in his novels, proving how Khair's writing fits into the genre of "popular postcolonial fiction". Contemporary IEL has emerged from a complex linguistic interplay that reflects a "chutnification" of various Indian languages. This phenomenon encapsulates the blending of different dialects and linguistic forms, resulting in a multi-faceted vernacular characterising modern Indian English writing. While Khair is undeniably a postcolonial author, his engagement with colonial history and the social evils of contemporary society diverges from traditional narratives of postcolonial fiction. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Khair's literary sensibility is enriched by his provincial and rural background; simultaneously, he employs a rustic and coarse lexicon to depict the complexities of rural multicultural life in India. By engaging in the grim and raw realities of life, Khair positions himself as a writer who remains true to the lived experiences of his characters, allowing for a more profound critique and exploration of intersectional identity and belonging within the postcolonial context. Khair critiques the overgeneralization[5] of rural life and the reduction of complex social dynamics to simplistic categories. By grounding his narratives in the everyday struggles of non-metropolitan communities, Khair points out the challenges that characterise rural India while rejecting the romanticisation of the rural as a site of purity or simplicity. This emphasis on the rural side of India, free from the pressures of cosmopolitan life, allows Khair to foreground issues overlooked in urban-centric narratives, offering a counter-narrative to the dominant urban perspectives of IEL.

[5] The word 'overgeneralization' has been used here for the way of thinking in which some writers see things always in negative perspective or applies same/own experiences in different places.

In *Filming* and *The Bus Stopped*, Khair constructs a complex web of characters drawing from various social strata, capturing the aspirations of rural and non-metropolitan sides of Indian communities striving for metropolitan and cosmopolitan opportunities. Through these characters, Khair examines the tensions between rural life and urban modernity, presenting a nuanced exploration that constitutes "Indianness" in far regions largely untouched by cosmopolitan influences. Khair's focus on rural India reveals the socio-economic and political issues that define these spaces, which are far removed from the concerns of urban elite settings. In both novels, Khair investigates deeply the rural landscapes of India, exploring the complex fabric of rural life where poverty, communalism, violence, and social hierarchy are central themes. His rural characters are often depicted as struggling within entrenched systems of inequality, where access to resources, education, and opportunities is limited. Through these depictions, Khair critiques the broader systemic factors perpetuating a vicious cycle of poverty and suffering, framing them as a significant barrier to social progress, challenging the simplistic and static representations of rural populations, offering instead a complex "Indianness" that acknowledges the diversity of experiences, identities, and social realities.

In contrast to the cosmopolitanism often associated with Salman Rushdie or Arundhati Roy, Tabish Khair shifts his focus towards a form of non-metropolitan, new provincialism rooted in smaller towns. Khair foregrounds the hybrid Indianness that emerges from these provincial spaces, offering a pragmatic and diverse view of India that celebrates its strange cultural and spatial heterogeneity. Khair's narratives frequently centre on marginalised, socially backward communities, emphasising the enduring presence of poverty, the worst social evils in such society by bringing to light the nuanced complexities of provincial life, addressing social constrictions and religious conflicts that continue to shape the fabric of non-metropolitan India. By narrating these provincial realities, Khair moves beyond the dominant urban/cosmopolitan discourse, offering a

counter-narrative highlighting the often-overlooked dimensions of mainstream representations, focusing on the hybrid, marginalised spaces of a non-metropolitan India.

By depicting the central setting, a bus journey from Gaya to Phansa, Khair offers a microcosmic representation of India in *The Bus Stopped*, rich in linguistic diversity and cultural nuances for the broader socio-cultural dynamics and panoramic view of rural India. Khair employs a distinct narrative style that vividly captures the essence of rural India, mobility, cultural diversity, and the vibrant lifestyles that define the nation. Khair's portrayal of rural life is accomplished with a keen sense of observation and awareness of the nuances that shape daily existence in a small town through the sketches of interconnected characters with a multifaceted and complex social fabric. The novel's narrative structure is complex, serving as a metaphor for life's unpredictability and layered intricacies. As Gasparini suggests, "[i]f this novel is a labyrinth, a bhoolbhoolaiya, Khair is Dedalus, the architect who, having built it, is the only one who knows its structure" (2014, 61). Each character on this bus journey represents a specific social class, allowing Khair to explore and critique various aspects of Indian society.

The bus driver, Mangal Singh, is the narrator and the window through which the reader perceives this fictional world. The driver's minute observations and philosophical musings reveal a deep understanding of the rural milieu while reflecting on the socio-economic disparities and the complex interpersonal dynamics of his passengers that define rural life. Mangal Singh's reflective and philosophical outlook contrasts with his obedient bus conductor and the exploitative Maalik (employer), creating tension between different power dynamics. Other characters, such as the criminal Chhotu, the untruthful Hizra, the failed IAS aspirant, the complaining foreigner, and the corrupt ministers, further enrich the novel's exploration of the complexities of rural life. This diversity is not limited to socioeconomic status but also gender, with the voluptuous maid and the

assumed wealthy aristocratic lady embodying different gendered expectations and societal roles. Khair's narrative technique is marked by his ability to juxtapose the personal and the political, the mundane and the profound, in a way that highlights the contradictions inherent in rural Indian society. Through the eyes of Mangal Singh and bus passengers, Khair cleverly weaves together a tapestry of ordinary life, where every interaction, whether banal or significant, reflects the broader socio-cultural forces at play.

The novel presents a series of evocative images offering a sensory and socio-cultural snapshot of rural India, capturing the descriptions of men "wrapped in dark chaddars," eating from "pattals or chipped plates," and sipping tea from "squat, thick glasses" evoke a strong sense of poverty, simplicity, and local tradition. These images are contrasted with the physical setting of rural India, characterised by the "rusted Phalgu bridge" and "plotted fields, mostly squares and rectangles," which suggest both the harshness and rhythm of rural labour. The natural world —images such as "thin green shoots" and "yellow flowers" sprouting in the fields or "a flock of doves" –serve to evoke both the beauty and the transience of rural life. The novel highlights the everyday but significant practices of life that define rural existence. The "dhobis and dhobins carrying bundled clothes" suggest a community bound by essential yet undervalued labour, while "a man in shirt and dhoti pushing his cycle" evokes a sense of rural mobility and simplicity. At the same time, the mention of advertisements like "Baidyanathy, Puja Ganji aur Baniyan and Ujala Toothpowder" on the walls of low houses presents traditional life with modern commercial influences.

In *The Bus Stopped*, Khair is fully aware of the underlying coherence and, at the same time, the apparent chaos of the story. He deftly captures the diversity of languages, customs, lifestyles, and linguistic practices in everyday interactions through the complex narrative structure. The characters' linguistic expressions, cultural references, and social

interactions on the bus witnessed India's linguistic and cultural pluralism. The novel exemplifies the linguistic diversity and pervasive use of 'manageable Indian English' in daily life. For instance, the bus conductor Shankar's use of the word "juntalman" (24), a hybridisation of gentleman with local idiomatic expression, reveals the playful appropriation of English in rural contexts. Similarly, his complaint about the driver's delay due to the unimportant "gup-shup" (24) with his friends highlights the informal, conversational nature of rural communication and a picture of the society where the pace of life often stands in contrast to the urgency and productivity expected in metropolitan cities. Khair also captures the distinct accents, behaviours, and mannerisms that characterise these communities through his use of vernacular language, foregrounding the authentic voices of characters. For instance, the bus conductor's casual disregard for the new cleaner's name, "When I need him I simply shout 're' or 'abbe'" (138), and the rickshaw puller's colloquial recounting, "She caught a preevaat bus to Phansa […] child in one arm and bundle in another, no aanchal on her head, shouting like the vulgar two-cowrie woman she was" (110), reflecting the unvarnished realities of rural life. Therefore, his employment of rustic and coarse language gives an authentic touch to the rural side of Indian life, as the characters use terms such as Brahmjoni (5), jalebis and parathas (5), chelas (16), ustad (17), sabji-puri (20), bhadrdraam (25), dehati cooking (39), gitpit English (41), priwait bus (49), old kothi (51) chappati and bhunjiya (59), ispayshull chai (68), naami man (72), pukka roof (100), unmusical bhajan (102), laatsahabs (170) and so on.

This use of food references in local dialect further emphasises the cultural specificity of the world created as food plays a symbolic role in the text. The reference to specific regional delicacies such as "khirmohan in Dhoda," "khaja in Silao," and "tilkut in Gaya" (58) and "white heap of makhana with its black spots" (55), highlights the diversity of rural cuisine and its deep connection to the local culture shaped by agriculture and cuisine. Khair's attention to the mundane details of daily life, such as the

"blue marble tabletop in some roadside restaurant wiped by a dirty rag" (61) or the "shop Manohar Sweets" sign that declares "yahan shudh ghee ki swadisht mithaiyan milti hain" (57), is not mere description, but an essential lens through which to understand rural Indian society. These images reflect a world in which the tension between traditional values and the pressure of modernisation is palpable. The contrast between the simple and unrefined, such as the "cheap, plastic-covered seats" (117) on the bus or the "petty farmers and landless laborers" (118) leaving the mofussil in search of jobs, and the more sophisticated images of "terrycot bell-bottoms" (49), and "the woman readjusts the pallu on her head with an automatic hand" sitting on the "black Rajdoot motorcycle" (61) reinforces the complexity of rural and urban identities in contemporary India.

Khair's portrayal of characters in the rural setting is not limited to economic or social classes but also encompasses the emotional and existential experiences of the people. The tribal woman "carrying a dead child" (157) or the burial of a dead child (178) with the help of a bus passenger evokes the raw, unspoken pain of rural life. The clear sight of stars at night, when "villages light no lamp beyond the waking hours" (192), evokes a sense of isolation and remoteness while simultaneously suggesting the profound connection between the land and its people. The line "peasants who believed in not telling policemen anything" (185) further emphasises the tension between rural populations and institutional authority for their survival. The journey from Gaya to Phansa traverses many small towns and villages, each with its own rhythm of life. It is distinct and far from the metropolitan experience, showing a multicultural space in India outside the immediate influence of postcolonial dynamics. Instead of commenting on the binary oppositions of coloniser and colonised, Khair focuses on the lived realities of a specific segment of Indian society, raising more important questions about humanity and social conditions without the apparent burden of postcolonial critique, offering a subtle yet essential exploration of Indian

life that resists the reductionist approach often associated with postcolonial discourse.

Khair also offers satirical commentary on the cultural dynamics of rural India, where the desire to learn and speak in English is often seen with social status and modernity. Through the humorous portrayal of uneducated characters in the novel, Khair exposes the vanity and social aspirations of trying to use English words in conversation despite mispronunciations to highlight the deep-seated belief that English speaking raises the status in Indian society, which is a marker of sophistication and intellectuality. Khair's depiction of Wazir Miya, who mispronounces the word "chef" as "chieff" and insists on being referred to as a "chieff" to raise his status within the kitchen rather than a cook, is both tragic and comic. The humour is deepened by the narrative recounting how Wazir Miya was corrected by the brothers of the narrator, whose correct pronunciation of English words results in a series of humorous distortions by the cook: "ishtake" (steak), "eesstoo" (stew), "chickun allah kaatey" (chicken à la carte), and "karma puteen" (caramel pudding) are examples revealing the gap between babu and collie classes. Khair's use of humour is not only for comedic effect but also to critique the obsession with Westernisation and the absurdity of social constructs that equate linguistic proficiency with status and intelligence.

Khair also employs explicit language and sexual imagery in both novels to highlight the raw and evil forms that exist in Indian society, often portraying them in stark, unfiltered ways. For example, in *The Bus Stopped*, descriptions such as the lasciviousness of dhobins (washerwomen), "who have the most lascivious hips one could imagine… gets an erection at the mere thought" (25), women have different smells (26), Zeenat "covered her head with the sari pallu and carelessly bared a leg to the knee" (64). These choices contribute to the realism of Khair's narrative, offering a candid glimpse into rural life's hidden and unspoken aspects. Kahir says, "There is much I am proud of India, and there is much I am ashamed of" (2008, 26).

Khair expresses a deep attachment to rural culture, bringing an autobiographical element in the novel when he states, "[t]here are times when I feel that this is the only home I have ever known, will ever know" (2004, 4) underscoring his affinity for the rural life highlighting the novel's exploration of identity, belonging, and rootedness. Khair also expertly employs Indian myths and historical narratives to create a sense of cultural continuity, engaging readers deeper into India's extensive cultural and spiritual traditions. For example, the myth of 'Sita cursing the Phalgu River for disobedience' (25), the 'healing properties of the water from the Sita Ashok tree' (66), and the 'ritual of throwing coins in Karbala Kund' (29), exalting Khair's narratives with layers of cultural meaning and situating his work within the broader tradition of Indian storytelling. Khair's notion of a glocal society also critically questions the complacency of those who assume they have seen everything by challenging incomplete knowledge. The narrator argues that "[y]ou feel you have heard all, but you haven't. You haven't heard the silence in Mrs. Prasad's flat" (103) by pointing to the massive gap between superficial and real/deeper understanding of the world. Khair also critiques the ideologies and false certainties held by the elite and wealthy people, particularly regarding the marginalisation of the poor and deprived. His critique is against all those who claim to possess deep-rooted homes and cultural continuity without any regard for humanity—

> Look, say those who believe that they have deep-rooted homes, stop, stop, they exclaim as we pass their counters and gardens, look, look, look, they shout, for after centuries of eradicating the homeless, les marginaux, the landless peasantry, the gypsies, the wandering Jew, the bums, the lumpen proletariat, after centuries of planting people like trees, they still have us, and so they raise their fingers and shout, thief murderer stowaway immigrant (2004, 199).

Khair enters a postcolonial discourse by highlighting a stratification of humanity outside of the imperialist norms and expectations by delving into

postcolonial themes, particularly the representation of rural India's impoverished and marginalised voices. As a postcolonial writer, Khair contributes to the larger study of postcolonial literature, which, as a tradition, has been deeply invested in giving voice to the 'other' by drawing attention to the silent voices of the rural subaltern, typically excluded from dominant narratives of power. However, Khair's approach is noticeable in its refusal to fully claim the voice of the subaltern, particularly the voices of tribal women from rural Indian villages. While his narrative certainly portrays the pain and social struggle of these silenced figures, Khair does not appropriate their experiences for social commentary, as he avoids the trap of representing the other in a way that might reduce their complexity to a mere instrument of social critique. In this regard, Khair is careful not to exoticise or commodify the subaltern, a danger many postcolonial writers have been criticised for. Said's famous argument in *Orientalism* defines this situation as how imperialist discourse often commodifies and stereotypes the "Orient" by framing it as inferior and exotic. Therefore, Khair's work avoids this form of essentialism by acknowledging his limitations and showing an awareness that reflects a postcolonial sensibility that recognises the dangers of overrepresenting or appropriating voices.

Khair does not speak directly for the subaltern in the traditional sense; instead, he keeps the gaps and silences in the narratives of the marginalised, acknowledging that some experiences are, by nature, beyond representation and understanding. His portrayal of rural life is sensitive to the complexities of social, cultural, and historical contexts, resisting to reduce the subaltern to a mere object of sympathy; by doing that, Khair achieves a form of representation that respects the autonomy and complexity of the tribal and subaltern while simultaneously criticising the postcolonial systems that historically subordinates them. Khair's novel does not romanticise or trivialise the suffering of the rural people, nor does it attempt to claim ownership over their narratives, offering a more ethical and self-reflective engagement while acknowledging the limitations of the narrator's voice.

Khair's portrayal of the tribal woman emphasises the urgent need to pay attention to the struggles of marginalised communities. The novel shows how a tribal woman who boards the bus to Phansa for medical help for her sick child is unaware of her husband's exact whereabouts, clinging to the hope that Phansa, a city with doctors, might help her kid: "I am taking him to his father in Phansa. There are doctors in Phansa" (2004, 158). However, the narrator reveals the tragic reality that the child is already dead in her lap, underscoring the dark future of such children. Her stoic reaction after being convinced of her child's death, "[s]he did not weep or go away. She placed the child on the ground before her feet, as if the child no longer belonged to her, and remained sitting on the steps" (159), speaks the depth of her grief, transcending any words or emotional expression highlighting the inescapable suffering such tribal women endure daily. Khair also explores the deep-seated social divisions in such a society that governs human empathy and solidarity where the tribal woman, marginalised by her social status and identity, does not get any solace from the other passengers, even from Parvati, a transgender, despite sharing the experience of marginalisation could not empathise with her. The failure of such empathy is deeply rooted in the intersectional nature of religion, caste, class, and identity within Indian society, where individuals find it hard to connect across these divides, underscoring the complex dynamics of social alienation.

The novel also employs Khair's fragmented temporal structure that weaves past, present, and future together to explore the journey of a transgender character, Farhana Begum, illustrating the dynamics of complex identity across intersecting social boundaries. Farhana embodies the characteristics of an ideal woman, meticulously adopting refined manners, clean attire, and polished language to transcend her past as a sex worker by adopting a Hindu name Parvati as she hopes to marry into a respectable Hindu family, thinking this decision will give her a chance of social legitimacy and acceptance in the society. Farhana's journey from a

poor transgender woman to a married woman in a wealthy family shows her refusal to be constrained by her past or birth identity, expressing a robust faith in her abilities, exemplifying the fluidity of identity and the assertion of agency within rigid societal structures. Her assertion: "I am not Farhana Begum or Parvati any more. I am Mrs Mirchandani. I will not be buried by strangers at a roadside" (191), reflects a hard-won liberation and autonomy, a departure from the limitations once imposed on her identity as a transgender sex worker. Khair's portrayal of Farhana's journey, like Durga in *Filming*, reflects her determination to shape her own destiny, crossing boundaries of religion, caste, class, and gender in pursuit of self-defined happiness.

In *Filming: A Love Story*, Tabish Khair intricately weaves an imaginative portrayal of early Indian cinema with the complex interplay of layered Indian Partition history, exploring the intersections of identity, fundamentalism, gender dynamics, social hierarchies, and communal violence. The novel interrogates how religious communities can weaponise ideology, often leading to violence and undermining the idea of togetherness and coexistence. Khair employs a typical narrative technique that integrates 'dream sequences' reflecting both personal and collective memory, comparing them with historical developments such as the inventions of barbed wire and photography of Indian cinema. The novel is structured in seven chapters, or "Reels," that adopt a cinematic style where each "Reel" unfolds like a film scene combined with the use of varied "rasa" (emotional flavours or moods) in the narrative, imparting a stream-of-consciousness quality that emphasises the fluidity of memory and emotion. Set primarily in India, *Filming* explores the contrasts between rural village life and the cosmopolitan vibrancy of Bombay (now Mumbai) and Denmark. This juxtaposition reveals Khair's glocal perspective, reflecting India's cultural and social transformations during the period through this innovative approach to the fictionalised history of Indian cinema.

The narrative spans three pivotal periods, reflecting partition memories and enduring trauma as the story moves across rural towns and villages in the 1920s, highlighting the stillness before the storm of historical junctures in 1929 and 1948, marking the height of partition violence. The narrative then shifts to the 1970s in Patna, offering a retrospective lens on the societal shifts and unresolved tensions that linger post-partition. Khair captures the repercussions of an unseen partition across generations through his narrative temporality. The novel critically deconstructs the hegemonic discourse of master narratives by foregrounding communal violence and issues faced by local poor people and groups. It presents the subalterns not only as victims of systemic violence but also as potential perpetrators, complicating simplistic binaries of oppression. The character of Saleem embodies the internalised struggle of identity, fighting with the shame of being the son of a prostitute and his father, a multilingual scholar. Saleem becomes a hybrid figure through which Khair highlights the class struggle and politics through characters like Satish and other industrial labourers, offering a critique of capitalist exploitation. By throwing light on the political tensions and film industry of the time, Khair addresses the grievances of millworkers and their protests against exploitative practices, like illegal extension of work hours. The novel depicts how political corruption and capitalist power structures work for characters like Dharamchand, once a textile mill owner, to becoming Seth Dharamchand, a tycoon in the film industry, underscoring the insidious ways capitalism and power perpetuate social inequalities.

Filming presents a critical portrayal of the dark realities of India's independence, characterized by death, destruction, molestation, migration, looting, and rape. The novel presents how the Partition and the rise of radical fundamentalism destroyed India's cultural and religious unity, breaking the solidarity that once existed among its diverse communities. The novel depicts a multicultural and pluralistic environment where individuals from various religious and social backgrounds coexist in mutual

respect and solidarity, devoid of political influence, through characters like Saleem and his friends. However, as the narrative unfolds, the narrator shows how fundamentalist and nationalist ideologies infiltrate and destroy this diversity, sowing division and distrust in the name of religion. The violent death of Bala, a Hindu, during a trip to Karachi, a region labelled by the characters as a "Mullah region" (237), causes this fracture between communities. Avik Sen's belief that a Muslim killed Bala reveals the prejudices that emerge in communal violence. Khair, however, complicates this narrative through Ashique Painter's inquiring question, "[h]ow do you know it was a Muslim that killed him?" (237), challenging the assumptions of religious violence. Despite this, Bala's family ostracises Saleem at the funeral, further deepening divisions.

Khair employs complex narrative structures, like an unreliable narrator, to provide multiple perspectives, highlighting the intertextual nature of the novel. Khair creatively juxtaposes history and fiction, reimagining the Partition of 1947 through the lens of Saadat Hasan Manto, an Urdu writer whose life was deeply connected with the Bombay film industry. Drawing on the memory of Manto, Khair creates the protagonist Batin in Copenhagen, who lives by two more names in different temporal and special locations as "Saleem and Lahori in Bombay", a prototype of Manto, to illuminate the profound sufferings endured by real-life victims of partition. Through the fictional character Batin— a reimagined version of Manto— Khair muses what Manto might have done or accomplished had he survived his turbulent years in Pakistan. While Manto's historical death left his writings fragmented and unfinished, the novel allows him to embody a fictionalised Manto, who continues to recount the stories of Partition survivors, reflecting on his own experiences. Khair's manipulation of Partition history offers an alternative vision of Manto's legacy, where the fictional Manto lives on to tell untold stories. Manto/Batin's philosophical reflections on the exploration of the subjective nature of memory and storytelling magnify the novel's thematic depth—

> Don't underestimate the materiality of the mind, young man. I know you are a scholar of cinema, but I will tell you a secret about motion films. They do not happen in the projector or on the screen in front of you. They are happening in your head (107).

Manto's ghostly figure in the novel is more complex and forceful in reimagining the life and death of real Manto, who chooses "the easier death … the death of just one person" by leaving the Bombay Indian film industry by escaping from the violence of bloody partition, as he "did not choose to leave. But simply chose to live" (271).

The distortion of collective memory always works as a tool for nationalist agendas and politics of power, particularly in the history of partition, where Scholars such as Urvashi Butalia (2011) have questioned the authenticity and accuracy of Partition survivors' narratives by addressing the gaps and less visible and discussed aspects of partition, emphasising the silences and different aspects of history that often gets excluded from dominant discourse. Khair contributes to this rethinking in *Filming* by challenging the sanitised versions of grand Partition narratives by shifting the focus to the experiences of local unknown faces who suffered in this, noting "those were disturbed times, times when people disappeared in more ways than one. […] that the past cannot be reclaimed but it can be redeemed- if only in the present" (396). Khair's narrative technique further emphasises the importance of gaps and silences, compelling readers to engage with the text to uncover its deeper meanings actively. The novel powerfully discloses the trauma of partition from communal hatred and violence, where the train becomes a potent symbol of death, which once represented movement and connection, suddenly becomes the harbinger of horror/death, transforming public spaces into scenes of mass violence and despair. The narrator recounts, "[s]uch stories were not uncommon in those days, when there were accounts of entire trains and buses going to Pakistan or arriving in India filled only with blood, limbs, corpses and three or four

scared children" (371), that shows the naked dance of death and the human cost of the partition.

Filming also incorporates a melodramatic structure of 'Intermission,' an emotional transition similar to the intervals found in Bollywood films. The fictional film in the novel 'Aakhri Raat' (The Last Night) further emphasises this alignment with Bollywood's storytelling conventions, blending romance, drama, and tragedy, mainly depicting a love triangle that mirrors the narrative effect of popular Indian literature. This device exemplifies the typical narrative pattern of masala Bollywood films as Barnita Bagchi (2014) observes it as a "common pattern in Masala Bollywood films, where the first half might operate as a romantic comedy while the section after the Interval moves more heavily into melodrama and tragedy" (77), this structural shift heightens the emotional complexity of both the novel and the film within the narrative. In this way, *Filming* bridges the gap between popular and literary forms, creating a layered and intertextual narrative inviting emotional and intellectual engagement.

2.6 Discussion of the Novels

Tabish Khair masterfully explores the enduring postcolonial binary between the self— represented by the dominant, powerful, and voiced; and the Other— embodied by the marginalised, voiceless, and colonised. This tension is depicted without compromising the form of postcoloniality by underscoring the significant socio-economic and moral divide between the privileged and the disenfranchised, most notably between labourers and officers in *The Bus Stopped*. In *Filming*, Khair extends this portrayal through Harihar, who gives out his only son, Ashok, to the wealthy Thakurs to fulfil his dream. The narrative highlights the ongoing struggles of India's poor people, reflecting the socio-economic struggle of such families who must sacrifice their desires to survive in a system that perpetuates inequality and systemic violence in postcolonial India. Khair's experimental approach to postcolonial and postmodern themes in *Filming: A Love Story* invites

comparison with Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). Both novels address the historical trauma of partition, yet Khair's postmodernism, as noted by Amardeep Singh (2014), remains "deeply preoccupied with modernist aesthetics" (71). If Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) reconstructs national history through an individual's experience, then Khair's *Filming* presents history through the eyes of the undead Manto, who speaks from beyond the grave to reveal unspoken truths about partition. This innovative narrative device offers a radically different perspective on the traumatic events of partition, shifting the focus from elite, national grand narratives to the voices of ordinary people like painters, writers, photographers, and labourers. Khair's postcolonial critique, thus, foregrounds the everyday suffering of marginalised communities, offering a counter-narrative to dominant historical discourses.

Tabish Khair's novels effortlessly bridge the discourses of literary and popular literature, creating a distinctive narrative that resonates with readers across genres. Khair evokes complex human emotions of adulthood and desires through sensory experiences in *The Bus Stopped* by skilfully blending romanticism with a nuanced exploration of life's diverse experiences. The description of Zeenat, a cleaning maid— "and it was Zeenat's smell that I felt most intensely. […] How can I describe the smell of a woman in her early twenties…" (27). Then, the scent of a woman: "[t]heir smell would draw me out of myself, send my imagination racing towards something else, make me yearn for, what? Change? Adventure? The clasp of firm, callused, gentle arms? Sex" (26). The narrator's yearning for the unknown interweaves with the notion of maturity, as he observes, "what entered my soul was their abstract labour- and the smell that came along with it was deeply subversive […] they had smuggled in their bodies" (27). Khair's mastery juxtaposes the sensual emotion with the intellectual, presenting a multi-layered understanding of human experiences. His narrative structure is similarly complex as the plot pacing is uneven by design, allowing for both slow, contemplative moments that leave a lasting

emotional impact, such as the death of a tribal child (158) and rapid—fleeting impressions that evoke transient emotional sensations, as the narrator reflects "not all memories are voluntary. Sometimes one has no choice but to remember" (150). This hold of narrative pace, fused with his use of meta-narratives and dream sequences and his organisation of narratives in reels rather than chapters, demonstrates Khair's innovative literary craftsmanship.

While Khair employs the stream-of-consciousness technique for introspective characters like Mangal Singh in *The Bus Stopped* or an unknown young man in *Filming*, offering readers a lens to perceive the complexities of their inner worlds, he juxtaposes this with a more rustic, first-person narrative style when portraying marginalised figures such as tribal women or bus conductor in *The Bus Stopped*. Thus transcending the conventional boundaries between popular and literary fiction with a profound engagement with the lived experiences of India's marginalised communities. One of the central concerns in Khair's fiction is poverty, a critical issue in Indian society that exists not only in remote villages but also in the slums of major urban cities like Bombay (Mumbai). Khair's novels evoke a sense of transnational uniformity and nuanced depictions of Indian societies, positioning him as an intersectional or 'in-between' writer. His identity as an Indian Muslim writer living in Denmark, alongside his upbringing in the small town of Gaya, reinforces his liminal status. Khair's unsophisticated writing style renders his narratives widely readable, drawing parallels to popular writers like Chetan Bhagat. However, while Bhagat often centres his narratives around urban, campus-based settings and youthful love affairs, Khair's works explore deeper existential questions.

From the above observation, we can say that Tabish Khair fits between the gap of literary and popular writing in Indian postcolonial literature, where his identity and place of belonging justify him as a writer of intersectional identity. Khair's creative writing revolves around different parts of the world, but he always returns to his birth land, India, where he

spent his first thirty years of youth. While living in his cultural roots, Khair gained enough consciousness and understanding of the marginalised communities in India; as Dwivedi asserts, Khair's writing has an 'authentic representation' (14), which this chapter proves by analysing both novels. From a space like Gaya, a "half-backed towns or mimic peripheries: cosmopolitan" (Kalam Haidri 2022, ix), Khair finds these spaces still lingering provincialism and incipient cosmopolitanism. He argues, "I feel that I grow up among people— a minority, but still significant— who were far more cosmopolitan than many of the people I have met in metropolises" (Kalam Haidri, x). Growing up in a small town like Gaya, it is the nature of such a space that people force themselves to look outwards. Khair did look outwards from this space to understand the faces of difference and gain experience as a writer.

Khair took it as a kind of duty, and his writing became a means to show what he believed through his postmodernist aspect while pointing out that "Phoophajaan, like my father, Dr Khalid Khair, was a feisty, independent-minded person, who belonged very much in Gaya, while not at all accepting its provincialism" (Kalam Haidri, xxiii). Tabish Khair started writing about such small spaces because he understood that spaces like Gaya, "the sort of provincial town usually disappears or reduced to caricature and stolid stasis in English" (Kalam Haidri, xvi). When such small spaces are ignored, we take the risk of reducing the understanding of the entire country because our larger majority of people live in small spaces in rural villages. Khair understands that we are already suffering from this neglect, so his focus is always on Glocal (between local and international) lifestyles.

2.7 Conclusion

In these novels, Khair's narrative canvas is distinctly rural, and his depiction does not romanticise or sanitise these settings; instead, he captures their complexities with a genuine concern that resists the allure of sophistication. Khair's glocal approach helps him to move beyond these oppositional paradigms of postcolonialism by contributing to a more

nuanced understanding of life that reflects the interconnectedness of cultural identities in a globalised world. Incorporating regional dialects and colloquial expressions creates a form of vernacularization that significantly bridges the gap between English and *Bhasha* languages or between literary and popular culture by challenging the traditional binaries within postcolonial literary discourse. As Anjaria observes, the fusing of linguistic voices "sheds new light on some of the old debates central to postcolonial literary criticism" and "pitted Indian Writing in English (IWE) and its global audience against *bhasha* writers and their local ones" (51). By transcending the conventional divide between English and regional languages, his novels contribute to the richness of Indian literature by reigniting debates on language, identity, and representation within postcolonial studies. Hailing from Gaya, the same region where the novels are set, what Khair narrates brings a deep, intrinsic familiarity to his fictional world because of his intimate knowledge of regional slang, idiomatic expressions, and linguistic nuances of local voices.

Khair alters the national history in *Filming* through a postmodern manipulation of death and memory by reimaging the dead as undead through Manto by revitalising the historical and literary significance of his narrative. Manto becomes a vehicle for truth-telling living ghosts— where the dead speak the truth— offering a radically different perspective on the Partition, which starkly differs from Rushdie's historical approach shaped by individual experience and narrative reconstruction. By allowing the dead to articulate the painful realities of Partition, Khair challenges conventional historical storytelling, inviting the readers to confront a more multifaceted and fragmented view of the past.

Khair's narrative approach is deeply engaged with the intricacies of individual lives within the larger postcolonial context, exemplifying Henry James's definition of fiction in *The Art of Fiction* (1884)— a personal and direct impression of life, one that relies on the intensity of emotional and intellectual engagement. James argues that fiction must provide the freedom

to feel and express these impressions. Khair's works demonstrate this freedom through his glocal style and defying the genre distinction to explore the complexities of Indian rural identity and culture. The characters in the novel do not merely symbolise postcolonial hybridity, but rather, they inhabit the ambiguities of their social, cultural, and historical contexts—rooted in caste, class, and religious differences —offering a more authentic and layered portrayal of life in postcolonial India. Khair's exploration of poverty, migration, and class disparity reflects a humanistic and empathetic approach transcending the typical frameworks of both popular and literary fiction, appealing to a wide readership across social classes and age groups due to its accessibility and depth.

His writing moves away from the conventions of popular literature, challenging the rigid theoretical frameworks and bringing innovative narrative strategies and perspectives that invite readers to reconsider traditional forms of literary engagement. In blending the elements of popular and literary fiction, Khair cultivates an engaging and inclusive narrative approach inviting both intellectual and emotional responses, making it "popular postcolonial fiction" in the truest sense, which is both artistically sophisticated and broadly resonant for the understanding of contemporary IEF. Through his innovative approach, Khair challenges the rigid theoretical frameworks, setting new literary expression and disrupting the existing conventions, bridging the gap between popular and literary novels and creating a space that is neither fully within the established canon nor entirely outside, marking a reconfiguration of literary hierarchies and contributing to the evolving discourse of IEF. This portrayal is emblematic of Khair's approach to "popular postcolonial fiction", which seeks to balance the formal aesthetic beauty with the depth of humanity.

Chapter 3

SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE AND NEW XENOPHOBIA IN KAHIR'S NOVELS *NIGHT OF HAPPINESS* AND *THE BODY BY THE SHORE*

"Violence is man re-creating himself." – Frantz Fanon

3.1 Introduction

Scholars in violence studies explore how the perpetration of physical violence has significantly decreased over recent decades (Han & DeMarco, 2018; Viereck, 1995; Pinker, 2011; Khair, 2016). However, the perpetuation of systemic violence has intensified in diverse and often subtle forms, making it increasingly difficult to identify, articulate or address. Violence has evolved into a pernicious force that primarily operates in concealed and systemic forms; as Byung-Chul Han argues, systemic violence has "shifted from the visible to the invisible, from the direct to the discreet, from the physical to the psychic, from the martial to the medial, and from the frontal to the viral" (2018, vii). This radical shift underlines increasingly mediated and psychological aspects of violence in contemporary societies. Systemic violence has become a notable source of distress, a prevalent concern in the age of capitalism and late or high capitalism.[6] Within this framework, xenophobia has transformed into "new xenophobia", explained by Khair in his non-fictional work, *The New Xenophobia* (2016), characterised by its insidious nature that holds significant relevance in contemporary literary and cultural discourse, offering a critical reconceptualisation of xenophobia, its evolving nature and intricate relationship with systemic violence. Xenophobia is inherently linked to identity, and identity plays a critical role in the power dynamics leading to violence, which are closely connected with xenophobic

[6]High capitalism denotes here peak of capitalism where we begin to lose the sense of money in terms of currency because it becomes abstract in numbers only.

ideologies. This interconnectedness makes Khair's understanding of new xenophobia vital for examining the intersections of identity, xenophobia and systemic violence. In *The New Xenophobia*, Khair inspects the evolving nature of xenophobia, asserting that under the conditions of high capitalism, new xenophobia is characterised by a deceptive and systemic form of violence in third-world countries (2016, 8). Building on this conceptual structure, this chapter investigates systemic violence in Khair's *Night of Happiness* (2018), set in India and *The Body by the Shore* (2022), set in Denmark, through the lens of Khair's non-fictional book, *The New Xenophobia* and how it perpetrates systemic violence not only in the first world country but globally.

In contemporary society, it seems violence has lost its true identity,[7] given its uninterrupted announcements in various media platforms—be it on live TV, radio broadcasts, or print media. The rise of violence in this age of capitalism and high capitalism has transformed its nature by adopting facts and data, obscuring its devastating impact on people. There is a growing fear of indirect or systemic violence perpetrated by large systems, institutions, and people in power who occupy the upper echelons of society, then direct violence or physical violence perpetrated by ordinary individuals. Systemic violence becomes more insidious and pervasive as it operates through systemic structures —through economic deprivation, social alienation, and psychological trauma— exploiting vulnerable and poor people, creating a form of harm that is difficult to confront or resist. In Khair's novels, this chapter explores the multifaceted forms of systemic violence at the intersection of other social tropes, such as identity, power, and xenophobia. The study also addresses other extensive social factors by critically analysing the specific cultural and geographical regions in novels and how they perpetuate systemic violence within India and Denmark,

[7] 'True-identity' here I mean the subversive nature of violence.

contributing to a deeper understanding of Khair's literary engagement with contemporary socio-political realities.

Slavoj Zizek's *Violence* (2008) explores how violence is perceived and misperceived, investigating its varied manifestations within globalisation, capitalism, fundamentalism, and language. He raises two essential questions regarding the permissiveness of violence in philanthropy and the violence engendered by capitalism and civilisation, which are especially pertinent in the contemporary era, where people are mostly ignorant regarding the systemic violence embedded in these structures. Zizek's discussion of violence in philanthropy reveals this paradoxical nature, where an individual's self-denial often masks the deeper structural inequalities perpetuating systemic violence. Similarly, capitalism has its inherent violence in the processes of accumulation and exploitation, especially in the crafty normalisation of inequities that underpin societal structures. Therefore, understanding the permissiveness of such violence, whether overt or covert, is essential in contemporary societies. Furthermore, the rise of systemic violence reinforces the urgency of examining whether manifestations of such violence are deliberate or unintended consequences of complex societal mechanisms.

Many scholars and intellectuals of violence studies have defined and categorised violence. However, this study employs the categorisation of violence done by Zizek, where he points out three interrelated forms of violence: subjective, objective, and systemic. Zizek defines subjective violence as directly visible, physical violence perpetrated by an identifiable agent such as a criminal or terrorist. Objective violence, in contrast with subjective violence, operates indirectly and invisibly embedded within language or cultural practices, often perpetrating violence through threats, racism, hate speech, and discrimination. Within the sphere of objective violence, Zizek identifies systemic violence or symbolic, the most insidious and concealed form of violence. Zizek defines systemic violence as something akin to the notorious "dark matter" of physics— a hidden yet

powerful force that must be accounted for to understand the incoherent outbreaks of subjective violence (2008, 2). Systemic violence is perpetuated through the interplay of economic, social, and political structures that dominate and exploit individuals, particularly in precarious circumstances. Such violence is rooted in complex social systems, where institutional structures perpetuate harm, which is mostly normalised within societal mechanisms because of its invisible and unperceivable nature. Vincenzo Ruggiero, referencing Paul Farmer, explains the concept of systemic violence as being "found among the pathologies of power that emerge in several spheres of life" (Farmer, 2004; *Visions of Political Violence*, 2020, 12). Ruggiero further argues that

> Systemic violence refers to the harm people suffer from the social structure and the institutions sustaining and reproducing it. […]. It does not convey an image of direct physical aggression, systemic violence is the cause of suffering, disability, and premature death. Engrained in social injustice, it affects people and groups differently and can be closely interdependent with domestic violence, hate crime, police violence, state violence, terrorism, and war (2020, 11).

This form of violence emphasises the need for nuanced understandings of its systemic dimensions deeply embedded within the structures of power and inequality that shape contemporary society. People have to live in society and social systems where the pervasive nature of these structures compels them to engage with a system that inherently perpetuates harm, making such violence unavoidable in contemporary society. Khair underscores this point by asserting that "like globalisation, capitalism touches almost everyone in the world today in some way or the other" (2016, 149). People cannot completely cut themselves from capitalism's extensive reach; they have to correlate themselves with this framework, making systemic violence an intrinsic element of daily life that is normalised through participation in institutional practices and economic systems.

While all forms of violence –subjective, objective, and systemic – are inherently interrelated, this study focuses exclusively on systemic violence. Primarily, subjective violence mainly serves as a gateway by which direct violence changes into indirect violence within systemic structures; as Zizek observes, "the intricate relationship between subjective and systemic violence is that violence is not a direct property of some acts, but is distributed between acts and their contexts, between activity and inactivity" (2). This interplay underscores how systemic violence emerges as an embedded feature of societal systems. Within the broader category of systemic violence, structural and epistemic violence emerge as critical subcategories, where structural violence operates through institutionalised mechanisms, whereas epistemic violence involves the erasure, marginalisation, or knowledge systems, identities, and cultural narratives systematically perpetuating violence to individuals or groups through the normalised operations of societal structures and epistemological frameworks.

Violence is mostly connected with religious, racial, cultural, ethnic, or sexual identities in any society or nation, as individuals primarily tend to define themselves through these identities, where xenophobia plays a critical role by inciting people or groups to engage in death games compelled by fear and hatred of the Other. The history of mass violence across the world, including the atrocities of Nazi Germany, the World Wars, the 9/11 attacks, and the Holocaust are somehow catalysed by xenophobia. India has witnessed several mass violence caused by xenophobic sentiments, including the partition of India in 1947, the 1984 Sikh Massacre, the Gujarat riots of 2002 and so on. Such instances of religious and ethnic violence highlight how xenophobia plays a central role in mass massacres and social divisions. However, in the contemporary era, marked by high capitalism and liberalism, the nature of xenophobia— once characterised by overt, subjective/physical violence— has transformed into a more insidious form of systemic violence. Therefore, this evolving nature of xenophobia

into new xenophobia poses a critical concern in contemporary society through its various forms of oppression by systemic violence.

3.2 *The New Xenophobia* (2016) and Khair's Argument

Khair argues that "xenophobia always has to be expressed, and thus contains an element of overt hostility" (2016, 3), akin to Hannah Arendt, who emphasises the instrumental nature of violence, noting that violence requires action and is always a deliberate choice by a perpetrator against a victim. In her study, *On Violence* (1970), she posits that "violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power" (35), highlighting the interconnectedness of violence and power and underlining how violence functions as an expression and extension of power relations. This observation connects xenophobia to systemic violence, suggesting that xenophobia functions as a vehicle for expressing hostility that is both intentional and targeted, as this interplay of violence and xenophobia intensifies systemic harm through deliberate acts of exclusion, discrimination, and exploitation. The general definition of xenophobia is "[a] groundless or unreasonable fear of foreigners or strangers or that which is strange" (2016, 2), where the term 'foreigners' should not be narrowly interpreted as referring exclusively to individuals or things from other nations as it can encompass any people or phenomena perceived as unfamiliar within a nation. However, this definition of xenophobia requires a reinterpretation and expansion in this interconnected globalizing world where encountering a foreigner or unfamiliar individuals and things has become increasingly common. In a country like India, it becomes more pervasive and multifaceted because of the overt and covert sense of xenophobic mentality, which manifests in various cultural, ethnic, religious, and racial forms of violence.

Tabish Khair asserts that "new xenophobia" predominantly operates within First World nations, including affluent European countries, as well as in "uneven capitalist societies like those of America or India" (2016, 6).

This phenomenon, deeply intertwined with high capitalism, perpetuates systemic violence in subtle and concealed forms. According to Khair, the conditions necessary for the emergence of new xenophobia and its systemic violence in Third World countries, such as India, include the presence of "a globalised metropolitan culture" (2016, 48). He argues that new xenophobia also manifests within the highly capitalised section of Third World societies, providing an example of farmer suicides in India (49), suggesting that these suicides reflect the indirect yet devastating consequences of systemic violence perpetuated by high-capitalist structures. Therefore, Khair identifies high capitalism as the common denominator across diverse socio-economic contexts, serving as a primary catalyst for the emergence of new xenophobia and its perpetration of systemic violence.

Tabish Khair argues that old xenophobia transitions into new xenophobia within power structures where the unequal distribution of power, rather than mere fear of the unfamiliar, becomes the primary driver of violence (181). In globalised capitalist societies, power is no longer predominantly measured by traditional markers such as education, art, or having a peaceful life. Instead, wealth becomes the source of power, where money provides them with a material sense of authority and dominance. In this framework, new xenophobia shifts the focus from irrational fear of strangers to the systemic inequalities created by uneven economic systems, which create suffering and violence. Khair investigates the concept of new xenophobia within the framework of globalisation and its profound effects on the relationship between capital and labour, pointing out that labour is now more chained than capital, where capital enjoys more mobility than money or goods. He posits that in contrast to old xenophobia, which is rooted in capitalism handled by production, labour, and goods, new xenophobia is created by capitalism, which is increasingly detached from these traditional categories (Khair 2016, 7). This change is paradoxical in the global world, where international labour is far less free to move than global capital. Therefore, Khair justifies that new xenophobia manifests

mostly in the First World countries, where the mobility of capital advances the economic inequalities perpetuating systemic violence.

Khair's study of new xenophobia primarily remains focused on the economic dimensions, not fully addressing the broader social or political tropes—religion, caste, race, and language—that, too, contribute to the perpetuation of systemic violence. The tropes of identity, power, and social inequality, which intersect with economic structures, also play a significant role in shaping the nature of new xenophobia and the violence it engenders. The chapter argues that new xenophobia operates within different socio-political frameworks through its varied expressions and mechanisms in different cultural and economic landscapes. I argue that while high capitalism certainly contributes to the rise of new xenophobia, it is not the sole factor for new xenophobia and its systemic violence. Other social tropes in its complex systems also play critical roles in perpetuating systemic violence through new xenophobia in the global South that can include the deeply entrenched caste system, racial-based violence, religious intolerance, and linguistic discrimination. So, this chapter is an extension and a diversion of Khair's assertion that "new xenophobia predominantly prevails in First World countries, particularly in affluent welfare states" (2016, 7). It explores new xenophobia, which is not confined only to highly capitalist societies but can manifest in various forms and contexts across different societies, including those in the Global South, particularly India. Xenophobia is inherently linked to identity, where identity plays a critical role in the dynamics of power and violence, which are deeply interwoven with xenophobic ideologies, proving the interconnectedness of examining the intersection.

In India, the social systems are complex and extensive, where new xenophobia becomes deeply embedded within the social fabric, contributing to the continuous clandestine systemic violence. The concept of a "system" is defined differently by major dictionaries; the Collins

English Dictionary defines a system as “a way of working, organising, or doing something which follows a fixed plan or set of rules,” whereas the Oxford Dictionary defines it as “an organised set of ideas or theories or a particular way of doing something.” These definitions suggest that systemic violence can arise from the dysfunction or failure of systems, particularly those that operate on large scales, such as governmental or private institutional frameworks. When it comes to India, a country of billions of people, the institutional setup is grounded in a broad democratic structure, which, while offering significant frameworks for governance and rights, often becomes the source of its own limitations. Although social equality is constitutionally guaranteed in India, the implementation of these rights is frequently obscured by systemic loopholes, as no system is immune to imperfections, and it is within these gaps of enormous systems that systemic violence can flourish.

India’s social fabric is complex, shaped by its multicultural, multidimensional, multireligious, and multilingual identity, where caste, class, and religious divisions exacerbate these complications. Although this plural or multi-social structure contributes to the richness and colourfulness of India, it also affects it through the rise of many social ills manifesting systemic violence through xenophobia. The interplay of such social factors often leads to systemic exclusions, discrimination, and inequalities, which become deeply ingrained in the fabric of society, playing a critical role in stimulating the continuance of systemic violence in the societal landscape. The perpetuation of systemic violence primarily affects those who are poor, marginalised, or disenfranchised, often trapped within oppressive social or financial systems. The prevalence of systemic violence is frequently ignored by those who either lack the power to challenge it or are unwilling to confront the dominant structures that uphold it, resulting in continued suffering, vulnerability, and despair.

3.3 Transformation of Xenophobia into New Xenophobia

Tabish Khair introduces the concept of "new xenophobia" firstly in his article, *Capital and the New Xenophobia* (2015), where he argues that contemporary xenophobia requires not only a reinterpretation of traditional mechanisms but also the development of theoretical and cognitive frameworks to identify its emergent "civil" forms. Khair depicts xenophobia in two categories— 'old' and 'new.' The old xenophobia is characterised by apparent or visible demonstrations, such as racist attacks, communal riots, and religious hatred, often involving direct subjective or physical violence; in contrast, the new xenophobia works more secretly, relying on invisible and systemic forms of violence. Khair further differentiates that xenophobia works differently in Eastern and Western contexts: in Third World countries, xenophobia frequently assumes the form of ethnic cleansing or violence rooted in entrenched hierarchies, including ethnicity, caste, and religion (2016, p. 1), whereas in First World countries, Khair perceives an absence of such complex social systems, leading to different manifestations of xenophobia. Therefore, understanding xenophobia at the ground level is central to its conceptual analysis as Khair argues that "Xenophobia is not so much about unreasonable or reasonable fear of strangers as it is about an unequal and unfair enactment and institutionalisation of one's power over others" (2016, 168).

For Khair, the construction and reception of xenophobia, whether in its old or new forms, is fundamentally rooted in relationships of power, with capitalism serving as the dominant structural framework, where xenophobia and power work together, manifesting in physical and non-physical forms of oppression, and violence as Khair argues, power is an individual or group's capacity to act upon others' existence and consciousness. Therefore, the traditional understanding of xenophobia, based on fear, requires re-evaluation, where Khair proposes a revised definition of xenophobia that primarily originates from the exercise of power rather than fear: "Xenophobia is the attempt to reduce the other to a stranger and/or to

reduce the strangeness of the other in a bid to empower oneself on terms denied to the other" (2016, 187). In such a situation, Emmanuel Levinas's ethical framework, "if there is a Self, there has to be an Other," will change when applied to the emotional dynamics of the confrontation between self and other. In this case, fear or terror is one of the primary emotions experienced when the self encounters the other. Khair critiques and extends this framework by emphasising how xenophobia simplifies the cognitive relationship between self and others through the construction of the stranger.

Khair argues that xenophobia does not merely arise from fear; instead, it transforms and manipulates the perception of the other by imposing a particular type of strangeness that warrants fear (168), complicating the cognitive and emotional dynamics of self-other relations, where the other takes a negative identity creating fear, not because they are to be feared but because of the reactionary and reductive response from the self. Khair argues that xenophobia employs both emotion and reason, often consciously, to sustain and reinforce power structures in which strangers are systematically disadvantaged and, at best, tolerated (2016, 176) by asserting that "[t]he genuine emotional force of the self's encounter with the other is invested in the xenophobe's reaction to the stranger" (2016, 172). This perspective reveals how xenophobia distorts the ethical relationship between self and others, transforming it into a mechanism that legitimises fear and exclusion through the cognitive construction of the stranger. Therefore, Xenophobia operates fundamentally within and through power structures, as it involves not merely the fear of real dangers but also those that are imagined or perceived. Khair illustrates this phenomenon by describing 'encountering a stranger in one's bedroom' (175), where a xenophobe often justifies their reaction by invoking the possibility of genuine danger, even when no actual threat exists. Notably, the dynamics of this power structure also vary depending on factors such as gender. For instance, a man encountering a female stranger in his bedroom is less likely

to perceive her as a threat than a woman encountering a male stranger in the same situation.

Human societies have undergone significant transformations in their power structures, especially the rise of productivity and trade, which has positioned money as a primary medium of exchange and social relations, fundamentally deconstructing the traditional conceptions of power. In contemporary high-capitalist societies, the notion of power has shifted from Rousseau's idealistic notion that 'knowledge is power' to a more pragmatic emphasis on monetary capital. For such societies, money or capital surpasses knowledge as the ultimate form of power. Khair describes this transformation by highlighting the dual nature of money's influence—"money contained an abstract logic that was both revolutionary (in the sense of weakening old physical/material structures of power) and repressive (in the sense of imposing its own abstract structure of power on people and the world worked over by them)" (2016, 177). This duality underscores the unprecedented position of money, which is at the apex of the power hierarchy, dismantling pre-existing systems of material power and creating a new, abstract power based on economic capital. Khair illustrates this structural asymmetry by citing Duchrow and Hinkelammart, who articulate the inherent privilege of money owners within a monetary economy—

> Money owners in a money economy are in a privileged position compared to the owners of commodity. … The latter have to struggle for recognition in the market. … [But] nobody can participate in the market [once the money economy is established] without money (2012, cited in Khair 2016, 177).

This statement points out how systemic imbalances in the money economy—access to and control over money— becomes the main factor of power and agency. In the context of the money economy, money can be understood as flowing water, constantly drifting and preserving its movement; unlike other water commodities, fish and other aquatic creatures

are more vulnerable to capture or death. Within the framework, Khair opines, "commodities can go in and out of fashion, but money will always be in fashion as a mediating [force] between commodities, no matter which commodity sells best" (2016, 177), underscoring the role of money as the permanent mediator in fluctuating value or relevance. Unlike many Marxist and liberal perspectives, Khair draws a nuanced distinction between money and capital, categorising capital into two types— *'good capital'*—derived from labour, where individuals work for their money—and *'bad capital,'* which refers to scenarios where money itself generates more money without direct labour involvement (2016, 31). In an era dominated by money-driven priorities, Khair suggests that the wealthy disproportionately rely on 'bad capital,' which thrives at its zenith in high-capitalist systems.

Under advancing capitalism, Khair argues, capital transcends its original function as a mere medium of exchange, ceasing to operate as a social relation in the traditional sense, asserting that "with the expansion of consciousness, also expressed in social organisation, power inevitably gets more abstract" (2016, 4). This abstraction is particularly essential to examine the dynamics of money and capital, as it underlines the systemic nature of new xenophobia, where the uneven economic conditions created by high capitalism become the primary source of violence, replacing the traditional focus of xenophobia based on fear of the stranger. Zizek describes this systemic nature of violence as the impersonal mechanisms of capitalism where the "self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital" drives real-world developments and catastrophes, emphasising that the violence inherent in capitalism is "purely 'objective,' systemic, anonymous," and thus disconnected from the overtly malicious intent of individuals or pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence (2008, 12–13). In analysing the mechanisms of power within capitalism, it is essential to understand how power operates and is conceptualised in power dynamics. Diverging from Foucault and other theorists who often emphasise the physical dimensions of power, Khair defines power as "any imposition, physical or not, of one

consciousness upon another" (2016, 4). Thus, Khair's critique is not aimed at the concept of power itself but rather at its specific usages and the inequalities it creates within socio-economic structures.

Khair also reformulates the notion of violence by drawing on Levinas, arguing that "violence is to be found in any action in which one acts as if one were alone to act […]. Violence is consequently also any action we endure without collaborating in it" (2016, 4), pointing out how violence can be both active and passive forms highlighting the systemic impositions that individuals endure. The abstraction of power under capitalism, particularly in high capitalism, is central to the role of money, which, while historically functioning as a tangible medium of exchange and social relation, transforms capitalism into pure or absolute capital, becoming increasingly abstract. Khair illustrates this evolution with the example of "the evaporation of money, qua cash and currency, and its steady transformation into nothing but numbers" (2016, 5), arguing that this transformation is not inherently problematic but becomes a significant one when it changes its role into abstract money as predominant capital under "high capitalism" (2016, 5). This abstraction not only redefines the nature of money but also reshapes the concept of power itself. When money transitions into abstract capital, the power associated with it also becomes abstract. This 'abstract power,' Khair argues, perpetuates systemic inequalities, obscuring the inherent violence embedded in its perpetration while noting that "the self of high capitalism increasingly sees itself and its power in such abstract terms that it fails to register the inevitable violence of any exercise in (abstract) power" (2016, 5). This abstraction distances people and their social systems from the real consequences of their power, fostering an environment where systemic violence becomes normalised and invisible.

Khair further argues that under high capitalism, the extreme abstraction of money intensifies the abstraction of violence, fundamentally

altering the conception of 'stranger' within xenophobia by contending that "with extreme abstraction of money under high capitalism, we encounter a greater abstraction of violence, and hence a different conception of the stranger of xenophobia" (2016, 6–7). Thus, the stranger, once perceived in terms of physical or cultural differences, is redefined in the context of abstract power structures. The focus shifts from tangible markers of otherness to the stranger's relationship, or opposition, to the systemic logic of high capitalism. Khair identifies this reimagined new stranger of xenophobia as 'new xenophobia,' which operates independently, targeting those who evade, resist, or fail to conform to the abstract mechanisms of high capitalist power that derives its violence not from irrational fear but from the structural impositions of abstract power.

3.4 Chapter's Argument by Analysing Khair's Novels

This section explores Tabish Khair's novels through a comparative analysis to examine how new xenophobia and its systemic violence operate within each socio-political framework and different socio-economic societies, such as India and Denmark, revealing its varied expressions and mechanisms in distinct cultural and economic landscapes. *Night of Happiness,* based on the riots of Godhra Kand (2002), examines the racial and religious tensions and their repercussions on social dynamics, delving into causes of xenophobia driven by entrenched biases and preconceived notions, ultimately culminating in violence particularly systemic violence created by new xenophobia. The novel's narrator, Anil Mehrotra, a capitalist and entrepreneur, becomes the perpetrator of systemic violence, like any prominent political or fundamentalist leader in the socio-political perspective of the country. Ahmed, the protagonist, is depicted as a diligent employee of Mehrotra, who often asserts his reliance on Ahmed by stating, "I could count on Ahmed to stay back and take care of it" (2018, 6). However, Ahmed's identity as a Muslim becomes a lifelong hardship after he marries Roshni, a Hindu woman. However, Mehrotra's bias against Ahmed, a right hand in his company, leads to the devastating end of

Ahmed's life. Mehrotra's bias is evident in his remarks, who wants to with known factors: "I had never known a Muslim intimately," reinforcing his ideology that "[f]irst rule in business, first rule in life: work with known factors" (8). These narratives critique the prejudices arising from such reductive notions of identity that impact people's personal and professional relationships.

Ahmed comes from a poor background, having grown up in the small town of Phansa, near Bodh Gaya (9). After losing his father at a young age, the financial responsibilities came to his head to support his widowed mother since childhood. He supported his mother by earning some money as a tourist guide in Bodh Gaya, acquiring more than a formal education, as he learned many foreign languages, and this linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge ultimately helped him in employment with Mehrotra, who valued Ahmed's multilingual abilities. Ahmed demonstrated unwavering dedication throughout his career, never complaining, requesting leave, or seeking a salary increase, except for one day off annually to observe *Shab-e-Barat*[8] (13). Ahmed's life is marked by enduring hardship and loss as he first lost his father at a young age, then his mother, and later his wife Roshni, who was killed in a riot —a trauma that ultimately culminated in Ahmed's death. His living conditions in a cramped, pigeon-infested flat with a small open area "seemed to exude a mix of sadness and threat" (21) underscores the pressures of socio-cultural expectations, personal loss, and systemic marginalisation that define Ahmed's life trajectory. Ahmed, an adherent of non-violence, could not save himself from systemic violence that is deeply embedded within the structures of ingrained biases and prejudices, where new xenophobia helps those in positions of power and wealth.

Although the novel avoids overt Islamophobia, it highlights xenophobia that is channelled into new xenophobia embedded within social structures by powerful and influential people within Indian society.

[8] A Muslim festival that is known for the night of happiness and salvation.

Mehrotra's observations highlight how new xenophobia is deeply ingrained within complex social structures—

> I had read about the five pillars of Islam in school textbooks, but it appeared to me, from the news that I read now, that the pillars had been multiplied by a few hundred in recent years. Wasn't jihad one of the pillars too, now? (23).

Interfaith or inter-caste marriages, particularly between Hindus and Muslims, are often misconstrued as forceful arrangements or instances of "love jihad," wherein conversion seems to be mandatory. However, Ahmed and Roshni's marriage subverts these assumptions— as it is a consensual union grounded in mutual respect— when Ahmed dismisses the importance of religious conversion, stating, "Roshni - that's my wife's name - never really knew what faith she had grown in, and I never asked her to convert" (29). Still, the societal stigma about interfaith marriages compels Ahmed and Roshni to leave Surat, where Ahmed was employed, to relocate to Mumbai. This decision underscores the pervasive resistance within Indian societies to such unacceptable unions; exceptions can be found in elite families. Ahmed remarks on their struggles— "The neighbours had not accepted Roshni. Neither had anyone from my family, apart from Ammajaan. Mumbai made better sense. A big city. We could start anew there" (30). Nevertheless, Ahmed underestimated the reach of new xenophobia in the urban city centres, where he lost his wife and later job, leading to his suicide.

Despite Mehrotra's disdain for extremist ideologies like "those Hindutva lunatics" (28) who propagate such narratives, he reveals his discomfort with the concept of conversion by admitting, "the marriage bit I did not mind, but the conversion? That made me uncomfortable, maybe even a bit resentful" (28). Although he claims indifference to interfaith marriage, Mehrotra's ambivalence highlights the pervasive and insidious nature of societal biases, even among those who outwardly reject overt forms of bigotry. I argue that unfounded animosity and prejudice rooted in

racial or religious intolerance can be characterised as xenophobia. However, such sentiments become significantly more dangerous when exploited by those in positions of power. Leaders and influential figures often manipulate this bitterness, channelling the fears and biases of innocent people to incite riots and orchestrate mass violence for their own agendas. This form of "new xenophobia" is strategically presented as a social concern for the general welfare, masking its true intent. In large cities, influential figures exploit issues such as 'love jihad' to mobilise communal anger for their political and economic gain, often leading to systemic violence and riots. Tragically, Roshni, Ahmed's wife, becomes a victim of one such riot, losing her life without committing any crime; her only transgression in a nation founded on secular principles was to marry a Muslim man, being a Hindu woman and to live with a Muslim family.

In *Night of Happiness*, Khair intricately depicts the various forms of violence, interweaving subjective, objective, and systemic violence. Roshni's heinous death during the Godhra riots exemplifies all three types of violence, as she is physically assaulted, abused, and ultimately killed by a mob influenced by some political agendas. The mob, operating under the guise of communal righteousness, systematically targets Roshni, interrogating her about her religious affiliation before subjecting her to unnatural and humiliating death.

> The mob went about its task methodically. In that sense, it was surely not a mob. […] It was this organised mob that dragged Roshni down the stairs. They ripped the veil off her. They mocked her. 'Where is your God?' they shouted. 'Where is your bastard man?', they mocked. 'No one can save you now, you Pakistani whore!' (128-129).

Roshni's tragic death serves as a wretched example of how systemic violence is intricately linked to both subjective and objective violence. This scene of physical violence and cruelty based on her religious identity are evident under subjective and objective violence; however, people mostly

miss or ignore the less visible but most dangerous systemic violence that operates in the background of new xenophobia as this violence is entrenched in societal structures of power dynamics that dehumanise and marginalise individuals like Roshni. The riot that leads to her brutal death is not merely a spontaneous eruption of public fury but rather a calculated and deliberate act orchestrated by influential individuals operating within the upper echelons of society. Such powerful figures, often hidden behind the guise of respectability in their white clothes with white hands, manipulate social unrest and incite violence to hold onto power or to get more capital. Such public mass violence ultimately serves their broader agenda, allowing them to integrate political control and amass wealth. Thus, the political agendas that fuel communal riots or the racialised and religious prejudices embedded in the social fabric and the operation of state and societal involvement in such violence all contribute to the perpetuation of this hidden form of new xenophobia.

Ahmed believes in the principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence), as he says, "[v]iolence is a virus; it spreads by contaminating others" (124), but despite his adherence to non-violence, he could not save himself from systemic violence while working under Anil Mehrotra, a self-proclaimed, sensible and successful businessman whose capitalist power and xenophobic nature subject Ahmed to a form of violence that is deeply embedded within the structures of new xenophobia. As the "right-hand man" (8) of Mehrotra's business, Ahmed's life appears stable until the peculiar incident occurs on the night of *Shab-e-Barat*, a Muslim festival that "links the past with future" (15) by remembering the dead family. However, due to unforeseen business commitments, Mehrotra requests Ahmed to leave his ritual, promising to drop him home early in the evening. This simple incident becomes a pivotal turning point in the novel, as Mehrotra's visit to Ahmed's home unveils the tragedy that Ahmed silently endures. Upon arriving home, Ahmed warmly invites Mehrotra to stay and taste

maida ka halwa[9], a traditional delicacy prepared by his wife. Mehrotra never sees Ahmed's wife as she observes *parda*, a practice in many Muslim families. This moment of hospitality, however, takes a bizarre and unsettling turn when Ahmed serves Mehrotra a plate of invisible *halwa* and *nimki* while Ahmed appears to relish the dish from his empty bowl. For Mehrotra, this incident becomes a deeply humiliating and threatening experience, creating an atmosphere of mental unease and ambiguity in his perspective of life.

This incident serves as a narrative device by which Khair discloses Ahmed's past trauma and alienation, revealing the emotional and psychological scars he carries. Ahmed's plight exposes the invisible yet devastating impact of systemic violence, where personal and professional lives are disrupted by the ingrained biases and prejudices of those in positions of power, underscoring the vulnerability of marginalised individuals within capitalist and xenophobic frameworks. Mehrotra's perception of Ahmed is primarily shaped by Ahmed's Muslim identity— a perception reflecting underlining tensions between India's two dominant religious communities, Hindus and Muslims. However, this Hindu-Muslim xenophobia is not explicitly articulated in the novel; it exists as a systemic and cultural bias in Indian societies, which is rooted in historical and socio-political conflicts. Mehrotra's visit to Ahmed's home catalyses his growing suspicion and alienation toward Ahmed. Before this incident, Mehrotra regarded him as a 'sane' and dependable employee, holding a stable image of him. His horror and anger intensify after witnessing Ahmed's psychologically fragile state: "[w]hat a relief it was when things were exactly what they seemed" (42). Ahmed's psychological deterioration is not an inherent condition but a horrifying trauma, the murder of his wife that fractured Ahmed's mental and emotional stability. This chapter argues that new xenophobia operates— not through overt hatred but through suspicion, misunderstanding, and the dehumanization of the Other— underscoring the

[9] A sweet dish made of white flour.

social inability to understand and perceive the subtle ways of its operation, often misinterpreted or dismissed within dominant cultural frameworks.

The brutal murder of Roshni underscores the devastating impact of systemic violence, which was mainly fuelled by political agendas and communal propaganda as the narrator describes, "[i]t was one of the leaders of the mob who poured kerosene on her bowed head […] He struck a match and threw it on Roshni" (131), illustrating the dehumanising nature of the violence. The violence that destroys Roshni's life does not end with her death but continues to reverberate through Ahmed's body and mind, making him mentally unstable. Whether it is Roshni's murder or Ahmed's suicide, both confirm Ruggiero's (2019) argument that systemic violence is a root cause of suffering, disability, and premature death (11). Mehrotra even suspects that Ahmed might be connected with some terrorist organisations, like Jihad or ISIS, prompting him to hire a private detective to investigate Ahmed's past. The detective's investigation reveals Roshni's death in the Godhra riot, leading to Ahmed's suffering. However, Mehrotra chooses to fire him because of his growing xenophobia despite Ahmed's exemplary service as the most reliable employee. He asks Ahmed to leave the company and provides one year's salary as compensation. Elisabetta Marino (2019) argues that Mehrotra wrongly judged Ahmed as a potential Jihadi, for Ahmed is critical of those who manipulate religious texts to further their personal agendas (64). However, for Ahmed, dismissal from his job is not merely a professional setback but a deeply humiliating act, and he suffers psychologically as a man of self-respect. The psychological and emotional damage of this act of discrimination discloses the insidious nature of systemic violence, which is perpetuated not directly or physically but through institutional and personal decisions that degrade people based on their identity.

Ahmed is the prime target of new xenophobia in the novel, as his suffering is multifaceted by systemic violence. From his childhood, he faced the death and destruction of his family members, as he lost his father during

his schooling time and his mother after his marriage, and then he endured the tragic loss of his wife, the last family member in his life. Roshni's death becomes a pivotal moment in his life as he had to witness and bury the burned, charred body of his dead wife, which was piled on the road in a Muslim graveyard days after the violence (131). This personal loss becomes the first layer of violence that Ahmed faces, a form of subjective violence rooted in ethnic and religious animosity. The second layer of violence emerges through the psychological trauma that Ahmed endures in the aftermath of his wife's death. His mental state deteriorates as he retreats into a fabricated reality, as seen in his increasingly erratic behaviour, such as locking his home while believing that his deceased wife is still present and offering invisible Halwa to his employer, which reflects the depth of his psychological disintegration. The narrator notes, "[h]e was living a fiction, and that fiction was gradually living him. He was not reliable" (134), pointing out the psychological damage he experienced that disconnected him from reality. The third form of violence that Ahmed faces is institutional as Ahmed suffered immensely in his destitution and despair after being dismissed by his employer in his tiny flat, through a smiling regular face, which misleads others into perceiving him as "normal" or even "happy" (121).

However, Ahmed is unable to escape the consequences of his past trauma and current socio-economic conditions, reflecting the invisible, insidious nature of systemic violence in a more extensive, capitalist, and institutional system that perpetuates his suffering. He is absorbed, or "pushed-in" (6), into a system that chews him up slowly, much like a helpless creature in the jaws of a predatory force, making his existence and suffering non-existent and invisible in the complex network of social, political, and economic structures. The loss of employment for a man like Ahmed, already burdened by psychological trauma from the brutal murder of his wife, marks a profound tragedy intensifying the systemic violence he endures. Khair argues that while a corporation firing ten employees may not

be seen as violence, those employees' subsequent protests or resistance might be (2016, 111). The systemic violence leading to Ahmed's suicide is not merely a result of the loss of job but rather a culmination of the psychological, emotional, and socio-economic pressures that have been steadily eroding his sense of identity and self-worth. As a sensible man like Ahmed— already broken by personal loss— is not in a position to protest or resist, he gives up to the overwhelming weight of his circumstances, ultimately choosing to end his life. However, before his death, he prepares *Halwa* and *Nimki* for his boss, Mehrotra, on *Shab-e-Baraat*, stressing Ahmed's respect for the man who gave him a job in his difficult time but later betrayed him; still, Ahmed expresses his gratitude with a note, "Thank you for your generosity, Mehrotra Sa'ab" (138). This final gesture highlights the complexity of Ahmed's character and his struggle to preserve his humanity and dignity, even as he is consumed by a system of violence that has constantly dehumanised him till his death. Ahmed's suicide is not simply an individual act of despair but a tragic response to a system that leaves no space for the marginalised and poor to resist, heal, or reclaim their sense of identity.

Khair's *The Body by the Shore*, set in the 2030s of post-pandemic Denmark, envisions a bleak and foreboding future—a dystopian novel that explores a society that is highly capitalistic, more cruel, divisive, and desolate than the present. Within this imagined world, the Covid-19 pandemic serves as a foundation for exploring humanity's reckless interventions in nature, driven by an insatiable greed for capital and power. The novel critiques mankind's relentless pursuit of transcending natural boundaries, exposing ethical decline and unchecked ambition. The narrative is structured around few key events reflecting the disintegration of ethical and moral frameworks— the discovery of a black dead body afloat on the Danish coast, the exposure of a clandestine refugee route across the North Sea functioning as a site for organ trafficking on an abandoned oil rig, and the revelation of ugly and monstrous scientific experiments aimed at

making human bodies as "killing machines," devoid of reason and emotion both in life and after death, as instruments of control over humanity worldwide.

The novel employs a multi-perspectival narrative from three central characters, offering insight through their experiences: Michelle, a young Caribbean woman working as a housekeeper on the oil rig; Jens Erik, a retired Danish police officer; and Harris, a former covert operations mercenary. Each character approaches the central mystery of the novel differently— the perpetration of systemic violence by human commodification on the Danish coast perpetrated by scientific experiments/exploitation— from a different point of view. The novel examines how unchecked capitalist greed, operating under the ideology of the 'survival of the fittest,' creates systemic violence under the guise of new xenophobia functioning as its central mechanism. It exposes the secret functioning of an organ trafficking trade on the international level network hidden beneath the banner of a tourist agency, 'Magic Gates.' Within this illegal operation, the bodies of healthy young migrants, mostly from the Global South or East, levelled as "other," are commodified as resources to sustain the needs of the West.

The novel explores how global elites— philanthropic billionaires, corporate leaders, and influential political figures—remain insulated from the day-to-day realities of everyday life while orchestrating strategies that exploit vulnerable populations. Harris observes, "Only massive destruction carries so much money. Only millions of deaths interest governments and corporations" (2022, 190). The top five architects or figures of this system, who remain in a liminal state, obscured from the public, possess the authority to manipulate global events for their profit with ease are: "legends, giants: one from the corporate world, among the richest men on earth, another a highly decorated general, a senator, even a prime minister" (208). Khair's narrative underscores the worldwide consequences of such systemic violence, where actions like the sale of large stretches of the Amazon

rainforest, oil spills into oceans, the suppression of protesting workers, the disappearance of journalists, and the cyclical re-election of complicit governments are disturbingly normalized, as "it was reality" (209). By situating these events within the larger context of capitalism, the novel critiques the global mechanisms that perpetuate systemic violence and exposes the intersection of power, greed, and new xenophobia.

The unbounded human desires for eternal youth and physical strength have emerged as a defining aim, particularly for the wealthy who possess the money and power to commodify life itself. The novel critiques this relentless quest for longevity, where the boundaries of morality, nature, and humanity are transgressed by unnatural experiments on the human body, driven by the desire to extend life indefinitely, even after death. This desire is criticised by the statement: "[p]rogress for our species, Mermaid believes, is regress for the life on earth" (262), situating this critique within the broader context of capitalist greed, mainly through the intersections of oil extraction, organ trafficking, and the exploitation of human bodies. The limited resources of oil reserves are near depletion in the world upon which the global economy long relied, so those in power now shifted their focus to the human body, a limitless and exquisite resource for their exploitation. The abandoned oil rig in the novel, a site of industrial decline, changes into a burgeoning black market in organ transplants, underscoring the systemic dehumanisation in global capitalism, where the bodies of marginalised individuals— particularly those belonging to the vulnerable and the "other" (often from the Global South)— become commodities to be harvested and exploited reflecting the ongoing violence perpetuated by new xenophobic structures.

Jens Erik embodies a conservative perspective against immigration in Denmark, reflecting subtle yet pervasive tensions of how xenophobia operates in a world and highly capitalist country like Denmark. While Erik is portrayed as a reasonable and grounded police officer, his biases and perceptions of immigrants are shaped by his discomfort with their "loud"

language and behaviour, underscoring the cultural and linguistic divides between native Danes and immigrant communities. This tension is particularly evident in the recurring friction and debates relating "second-generation immigrants" or "first-generation Danes," a contested identity of immigrant populations often giving rise to intergenerational conflicts, as seen between Erik and his daughter, Pernille, who holds more progressive views (48). These narratives highlight how systemic violence operates through new xenophobia, particularly when cultural anxieties and prejudices are codified into policies and structures that govern society.

The novel examines the distressing reality of migrant deaths in the North Sea through the investigation of the first unidentified body, a twenty-five-year-old Black body likely from Africa, a sign of the broader systemic violence faced by refugees attempting to reach Europe. The dead body is found clutching a card bearing the name "Magic Gates" (80), a testimonial to the human trafficking networks that exploit migrants fleeing from the Global South. The countless other bodies are cast aside by authorities, by dismissive attitudes reflecting their xenophobic tendencies as one officer remarks, "[w]e have enough cases of our own, why worry about a stranger no one can even identify?" (83). This response points out the institutionalised dehumanisation of migrant lives, whose deaths are filed away and largely ignored, presenting a society where the suffering of the marginalised is not only ignored but actively commodified. The post-pandemic witnessed the unpredictable trickling of migration towards the West, perceiving the multifaceted crises such as climate change, economic deprivation, and Covid-19, resulting in an unprecedented wave of refugees— an invaluable resource for the elite West's exploitation as commodities.

In *The Body by the Shore*, Michelle experiences profound psychological distress, isolation, and claustrophobia in the oil rig, an environment where trust is non-existent. She mostly talks to herself, illustrating the depth of her psychological trauma and intensifying her sense

of alienation. To cope with this, she maintains a diary written in the form of letters to her mother, Maman, revealing the suppression of her suffering amidst the mechanical atmosphere of the rig, "I often talk to myself, like now, silently. Sometimes I say things to Maman. In my head…" (14). This internal dialogue reveals the desperate attempt to maintain her sense of identity or connection to her past. On the rig, Michelle becomes increasingly aware of the dark and disturbing activities after her horrifying revelation of kept humans in cages, referred to as subjects or "guinea pigs," are subjected to brutal and inhumane treatment, physical and psychological torture for scientific experimentation, and when those experiments fail, they would be ultimately killed. Before these scientific experiments on the oil rig, these people used to trap migrants or immigrants for their healthy organs to be harvested and sold for transplantation to wealthy people for capital, but the desire for high capital led them to plan for bigger scientific experiments where they can control world power by controlling people's minds.

Khair offers a chilling portrayal of a post-pandemic society after the global crisis, illustrating how governments and corporations, once separate entities, have become deeply intertwined in their pursuit of capital and power, "government and corporations had been in bed for decades: now they were producing hybrid offspring. Mutants" (205). This metaphor emphasises how the partnership between the two big institutions gives rise to a robust and ruthless alliance that operates as a "killing machine," enabling a systemic form of oppression that commodifies human life and exploits vulnerable populations for profit. Michelle, unaware of the horrific realities unfolding around her, becomes the victim of the same exploitation she witnesses, underscoring her tragic life, where those from marginalised backgrounds are subjected to systemic violence and manipulation by those in positions of power. Mermaid observes, "[t]he syndicates are everywhere. In every organisation, every governmental body. CIA, Mossad, EU, Pentagon, Parliament, whatever. You involve anything organised, and they get wind of it" (240), highlighting the extensive nature of these syndicates,

which operate globally and infiltrate various institutions, from intelligence agencies to governmental bodies. The novel critiques the involvement of such global institutions, which are considered pillars of order and justice have become perpetrators of systemic violence under the mechanisms of new xenophobia for control and profit.

The novel critiques how a nation, despite its wealth, fails to provide proper healthcare to its citizens by critiquing the global inequities in healthcare (unequal distribution of vaccines), exposing the exploitative practices of the pharmaceutical industry. The "magic bullet" symbolising a vaccine or cure becomes a commodity for profit rather than a public good, uncovering the dangers of treating medicine as a tool for financial gain and reflecting a broader critique of the systemic violence that arises when profit-driven motives overshadow the ethical imperatives of public health. Khair also highlights how there is a shift in the global perception of "the enemy," particularly in the wake of the pandemic, where "Muslim had been replaced by a virus as the global villain […] though with similar effects" (40). This shift intensifies the xenophobic tensions, as the virus becomes a symbol of the "other," fostering a climate of fear and distrust that reflects the earlier stigmatisation of Muslim communities. The new xenophobia plays a central role in perpetuating systemic violence by presenting an atmosphere of fear scapegoating marginalised groups, particularly the poor and the vulnerable, reinforcing the idea that such groups are not worth living, as the novel shows how some elites view these groups, "Parasites. They were best eradicated" (34).

The Covid-19 pandemic— a period of great suffering and unchecked systemic violence— becomes a good time for those in power to amass wealth. The pandemic brought a paradoxical period where the global elite thrived amidst widespread suffering. Kurt observes, "[c]haos creates capital. If you have capital…" (70), demonstrating how the wealthy elite often utilises crises to further establish their power of economic and political structures reinforcing the systemic inequalities, where pandemic becomes a

strategic moment to normalise and institutionalise abnormal practices for profit and control. The novel also highlights systemic violence by introducing the clandestine Command Alpha Mercenary Group and its former members like Harris, Kathy, Michael, and their associates, who are professional killers working solely for money. These mercenaries, devoid of moral consideration, kill people for those who can afford to pay them, reinforcing the idea that human lives have become mere commodities. Michael, also known as Mr. Watch, goes to the extent of stating, "[w]hat a virus it was, it changed everything, and no one has noticed it" (206), which highlights how the pandemic altered the social and political aspects with significant consequences, questioning the authorial power in times of crisis. Kathy— a former fitness enthusiast turned drug addict—suffers from the collapse of her investments following the economic fallout of the 2020 pandemic, yet "She never understood how, as some millionaire speculators were also making billions from the general misery" (153) underscoring the systemic inequities that enable the wealthy to exploit crises for profit, further deepening the social divide.

The novel also focuses on the global networks of illicit drugs and their dangerous addiction that exploit vulnerable people through systemic violence; when Kathy inquiries about the origins of a very powerful drug 'Crobe,' the dealer's response— "No one knows, they say it is all Big Pharma. Russian, Chinese, Israelis, our own people. Global shit" (179)— illustrates the complex and opaque system behind the production and distribution of such dangerous substances. It shows the involvement of multiple global actors and their interconnected world of illicit markets, from multinational pharmaceutical corporations to international criminal organisations, collaborating to maintain control over the global drug trade. In the novel, Harris reflects on the pandemic in Denmark, revealing how the pandemic reinforced existing power structures, noting that while millions of lives were lost, particularly among the poor, elderly, and vulnerable where the rise of vaccine technologies assured the elite that another

pandemic would likely follow the same pattern of disproportionately affecting the marginalised (64). The novel thus critiques the capitalist-driven priorities of global health response, where the wealthiest are insulated from harm, and the poor are sacrificed to maintain economic and social stability for a few, bringing the intersection of new xenophobia and systemic violence, which manifests through economic and political mechanisms.

The novel illustrates how mostly impoverished people, often lacking social support, become the victims of systemic violence. Kurt and his associate particularly prey on vulnerable young women without any protective "strings attached" like Michelle—a deliberate choice for exploitation, pointing out the precarious position of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy as Michelle states, "a girl who could disappear—and would be forgotten" (26). Kurt's preference for young and healthy fit women, like Michelle, reflects a systematic and calculated approach, as they can be used first as sex objects and later, "lab rats," for organ harvesting; as Kurt says, it is a "good business" to use these young women for experimentation. Such poor girls' healthy organs serve the affluent, particularly older white individuals, as those who come to the rig for organ transplants "are mostly white, though the color does not matter. You can tell that they all belong to just one race: the race of the powerful and the privileged" (107). This statement highlights the intersection of race, class, and power, where the poor are disposable, and their bodies are traded for the benefit of the powerful, reflecting the systemic violence which is not merely a matter of physical harm but also a reflection of the global structures of inequality through the commodification of human life.

Michael and his syndicate, who maintains the scientific experiment on the rig, believe in the philosophy of "survival of the fittest." Their experiments on the human body focused on controlling the world and the big money. Michael and his associates recognise the potential market for such technology among powerful political, corporate, and military entities,

all seeking to exploit this new form of human manipulation to serve their interests, whether for warfare or other forms of control (227). The experimental bodies are controlled and manipulated for various purposes, including inducing emotional states and hallucinations and even directing individuals to commit violence or suicide, revealing a disturbing vision of technological advancement (226). This perverse form of bioengineering reflects the ultimate dehumanisation, where human beings are reduced to mere objects for experimentation and exploitation, stripped of their inherent identity, dignity, and agency.

The novel highlights how organisation like Magic Gates operates in countries such as India and Nigeria to exploit vulnerable populations, particularly immigrants and refugees. They offer such people the illusion of a better life and false promises of relocation to wealthier nations, where they will be happy and wealthy. However, these agencies are deeply complicit in a system of human trafficking and organ harvesting. Hanif reveals the secret of these "refugee smuggling routes in the North Sea," where "men and women—young ones, always healthy ones— disappearing" (177). The pandemic accelerated the expansion of such illicit trade, inflaming the existing inequalities, where the rich who want to avoid hospitals in poorer countries can get the "clean and healthy" organs in the West itself, also increasing the demand and cost of healthy organs. The pandemic, therefore, works as a catalyst for the normalisation of such exploitative practices as the demand for organs becomes an even more lucrative market. Joans reveals the disturbing frequency with which bodies with missing organs have been found, "Such bodies have been recovered in the past too, bodies with organs missing. In Scotland, in Sweden, in Holland. Always off the North Sea" (152). This pattern suggests a highly organised and systematic operation, where bodies are transported to remote locations, where organ harvesting can occur discreetly, without scrutiny.

The case of the black dead body with missing "one organ" (151) reveals the insidious and pervasive nature of systemic violence when it is closed without further investigation—

> It had been closed from the top" (150). Anne Mette elaborates that the decision to close the case came not only from the police but from higher echelons of power, stating, "From the top of the police department? No, from the top of the state. Parliament? Minister? Yes. And even further up (151).

This statement foregrounds the deep entanglement of state and corporate institution and their interests in perpetuating systemic violence through new xenophobia, exposing the sinister network behind such acts of exploitation. The forensic report of the body revealed evidence of "autoclaving and microbial cleansing" (151), suggesting that the body was not merely trafficked for its organs but was subjected to sophisticated scientific manipulations where the body was treated to eliminate viruses and bacteria as part of a larger, more nefarious agenda for controlling the body and mind, extending the violence from the physical into the realm of scientific experimentation and biopolitical control. The treatment of poor people as objects for experimentation not only violates their fundamental human rights but also illustrates serious moral and ethical decay. Michelle's reaction to witnessing one such experimental subject in the lab—who has a "devastated face, a face torn by disease and pain" (140)— captures the horror and despair of inhumanity.

Michael's investing billions into such a secretive and highly lucrative project, where he says, "By controlling the 'microbe,' we can control every single human response in the world!" (219) reflects the point where humans can go to any extent for power and money. He emphasises that "we can do almost everything: we can influence it when the body is living, kill it when the host is dead" (224), exemplifying that technological and scientific ambitions, if not checked, can lead this world to extinction. Michael's project, which claims that controlling the human body both in life

and after death, highlights the extreme lengths of new xenophobia in the pursuit of profit and power where even the most fundamental aspects of existence, life and death, can become subject to manipulation for benefit. Michael asserts that these experiments "can make individuals behave rationally or emotionally, we can determine their reactions, get them to kill someone or buy something. In short, we can control them" (224). Michael's declaration to Harris stresses the masterly by which power can be exercised over others without confrontation: "Think of it, Harris, … you would not have to pull the trigger, you could get your target to hallucinate and shoot himself. Harris my friend, you will be out of a job pretty soon!" (219) imagining the dystopian potential of such technology.

Harris's dismissive comment, "What trouble can I give an organisation like yours?... What is there to prevent you from arranging a small accident?" (210) further emphasises the ruthlessness of Michael's organisation as described by Mr Watch— "Command Alpha both existed and did not exist" (205)— can eliminate anyone without leaving a trace. It also points to the normalisation of violence and the ease with which such organisations can carry out their lethal objectives, complicating the paradoxical nature of such powerful and clandestine organizations, that function beyond conventional systems of governance, which are neither fully accountable nor visible to the public eye. Michael points out that those in power, the "big people," are always hidden and protected from direct involvement in unethical practices as they mostly rely on powerful agents and syndicates to carry out their orders without exposing themselves to effects. He says, "They cannot do anything without someone like us winding them up. They are wind-up toys, all these government bodies, secret agencies, Alphas and Betas, all those fancy acronyms" (226). Perpetrators of systemic violence always remain gated and invisible, further distancing power from responsibility and making the system of control even more insidious. Through this lens, the chapter underscores the complex systems of power, where violence and exploitation are perpetuated through

intermediaries, distancing the elite from the consequences of their actions and simultaneously allowing them to maintain a facade of power and legitimacy through new xenophobia.

3.5 A Comparison between Novels

In Denmark, systemic violence manifests through immigration debates and exclusionary practices marginalising immigrant communities, whereas in India, it is reflected in the politicisation of language, caste, and religion. In both cases, however, these conflicts are not merely interpersonal but gradually evolve into systemic violence when embedded within institutional or governmental contexts. However, they function with greater efficiency and impact, perpetuating societal divisions and injustices. By contrasting these two settings, this chapter emphasises the universality of systemic violence driven by new xenophobic structures, revealing its ability to adapt and persist across diverse socio-political landscapes. Mehrotra's failure to trust Ahmed not only shows a significant personal flaw as he says, "I felt as though Ahmed had played a dirty trick on me" (58) but also the failure of the Indian social systems, which enable and perpetuate such racial and religious misconceptions. His reaction towards Ahmed is not blind xenophobia but a calculated decision that can only stem from a deep-seated prejudice and suspicion shaped by religious and cultural misconceptions.

The lack of visible atrocities in Denmark contrasts with countries like India, where basic healthcare facilities and infrastructure are disproportionately not as good as Denmark. The new xenophobia works in a first-world country like Denmark behind the pursuit of wealth and power, where immigrants, many of whom came to Denmark in search of a better life, find themselves trapped in a system that exploits their vulnerability. Once they pass through the "magic gate," they disappear without a trace (177), underscoring the extent to which marginalised individuals are erased and dehumanised, pointing out how new xenophobia manifests not only through societal discrimination but also through systemic mechanisms. Unlike Ahmed in *Night of Happiness*, who clings to memories of his wife

and past happiness to escape the harsh realities of his present life, Kathy and Harris in *The Body by the Shore* exist in a constructed, detached existence marked by artificiality, excess, and disconnection from the natural world, which ultimately proves to be suffocating. The study suggests that the poverty experienced by individuals like Kathy and Harris is qualitatively different from that experienced by Ahmed and Roshni regarding economic deprivation in India.

Both novels explore systemic violence and its psychological and emotional toll, although in distinct contexts. Ahmed, in *Night of Happiness,* ensnared in a cycle of guilt and trauma, is haunted by the brutal murder of his wife that renders him incapable of escaping his past. Similarly, in *The Body by the Shore*, Michelle Nancy becomes a victim of systemic violence trapped on the rig, a capitalist-driven exploitative environment, as she is also psychologically ensnared in the system, unable to escape the brutal reality that surrounds her. Like Ahmed, Michelle is a victim of systemic violence caused by new xenophobia, not only because of her immediate physical surroundings but also due to the larger, invisible forces that dictate her reality. Both characters illustrate the insidious ways in which systemic violence manifests through trauma, psychological distress, and the erosion of individual agency, highlighting the pervasive and often invisible nature of such violence within capitalist and exploitative systems.

In Denmark, people suffer not due to a lack of material resources but a disconnection from the natural world and meaningful human relationships. They have adopted a lifestyle that is increasingly devoid of authenticity, where dreams have become commodified and unattainable in the pursuit of wealth and status, contributing to their inner turmoil and suffering, which manifests in a variety of forms, including addiction, violence, and emotional desolation. By contrasting the lives of these characters with those of people in India, this chapter points out how systemic violence operates differently across the global north and south but

ultimately stems from the exact root causes of economic exploitation, disconnection from nature, and the dehumanising effects of capitalism.

3.6 Discussion of How New Xenophobia Operates Globally

Khair argues that systemic violence is a product of the inherent failures within high capitalist societies in the backdrop of new xenophobia, where unchecked greed for wealth and power exploitation creates systemic violence through social inequities. So basically, he contends that in the high capitalist societies in the first world like Denmark, systemic violence often results from an economic system prioritising capital over human well-being. However, Khair's analysis also invites consideration of how systemic violence manifests in the Global South, like India, which faces different challenges due to its moderate levels of wealth and ongoing development. In contrast to high-capitalist nations, third-world countries like India experience a different form of systemic violence rooted in the lack of sufficient capital and infrastructure. The poor economic infrastructure hinders the development of effective governance and social structures, creating inequalities, but the system somehow functions, providing poor-quality services, inadequate healthcare, or limited access to justice. So, the systemic violence in India arises not from the deliberate exploitation of capital, as seen in more affluent capitalist systems, but from the systemic failure to address foundational issues of development, infrastructure, and the distribution of equal resources.

Thus, while high capitalism in developed nations contributes to systemic violence through the concentration of wealth and power, countries with moderate resources face a different but equally pervasive form of systemic violence driven by the failure of developmental systems and inadequate infrastructure. In both societies, the structural inequalities that emerge from systemic violence affect vulnerable and marginalised populations. In India, systemic violence takes on a complex form influenced by various socio-cultural tropes such as ethnicity, caste, regionalism,

religion, class, and multi-language, which are deeply embedded in the fabric of Indian society, intersect with the broader failures of social and political systems, through the manifestations of new xenophobia. Therefore, the failure of systems in both first-world and third-world contexts is economic and deeply social, where historical and cultural factors become integral to the perpetuation of violence.

In his article *Violence, Identity, and Poverty* (2008), Amartya Sen investigates the intersection of poverty and violence, emphasising the dual impact of economic deprivation and political instability. He writes, "Given the co-existence of violence and poverty, it is not at all unnatural to ask whether poverty kills twice—first through economic privation, and second through political carnage" (Sen, 8). His statement stresses the intricate relationship between poverty and violence, particularly in contexts where social structures, identity politics, and economic systems are closely intertwined. In the case of India, the systemic failure to address poverty is compounded by the prevalence of social divisions, where identities based on caste, religion, language, and region often become focal points of exclusion and discrimination. These identities become mechanisms through which new forms of xenophobia are manifested, often in hidden, insidious ways, as explored in *Night of Happiness*, where violence is not always visible but manifests in invisible forms yet equally destructive. In high-capitalist societies, new xenophobia emerges because of the systems of power and capital. In contrast, in developing countries like India, the violence faced by marginalised populations is not only rooted in economic inequality but is also radically shaped by cultural, religious, and national identities.

Amartya Sen's argument that "[It] would be, I think, a huge mistake to see economic inequality and poverty as being automatically responsible for violence…" (2008, 13) highlights the multi-dimensional nature of violence. Poverty in these contexts is not merely an economic condition but

a social construct that is shaped by exclusionary practices such as caste discrimination, religious intolerance, and regional disparities. Thus, the violence experienced in India, as compared to first-world countries, is not just a twofold phenomenon of economic and political violence but a manifold one, where social, cultural, and historical factors intertwine to perpetuate a system of systemic violence. New xenophobia in such contexts operates on multiple levels, perpetuated by entrenched social systems and exacerbated by the failure of governance and infrastructure. The Indian social system, characterised by its vast democratic diversity, is more prone to systemic violence in countless indirect ways, with a billion-plus population living in the complexities of governance, social stratification, and historical inequalities. The subtle othering of marginalised communities marks this form of violence, the reinforcement of societal divisions, and the exploitation of the impoverished embedded within the everyday functioning of societal institutions. Thus, the Indian context exemplifies how systemic violence, compounded by new xenophobia, operates at both the macro and micro levels, often hidden in plain sight yet profoundly impactful on the social fabric.

The systems of various institutions are designed to operate in cooperation, maintaining societal order and justice; however, systemic violence often arises from the failure of these systems, particularly when larger institutional structures, whether public or private, fail to function as intended. A ‘system’ implies a set of organised structures and processes designed to work cohesively and efficiently, governed by predefined rules, norms, and laws. However, no system is entirely devoid of flaws or gaps. These loopholes, from inefficiency, corruption, or deliberate neglect, create opportunities for systemic violence depending on the size and significance of the system in question and its failure. In developed countries, the systems tend to be more robust because of economic prosperity, which ensures proper functioning. Meanwhile, in developing countries like India, the social systems may not always fully work with the systemic framework due

to a lack of capital. The malfunctioned systems often contribute to systemic violence and prey on discriminatory practices that are either overlooked or perpetuated by the state, powerful leaders, or business tycoons. The powerful create these loopholes through new xenophobia for their personal gain, taking advantage of the imperfect system.

Thus, the failure of systems in India is a product of the complexity of the country's democratic framework and the pressures of rapid economic development. The social structure in India is marked by its complexity and diversity, making it a multicultural and multidimensional society, which often struggles to address the intricacies of such a complex social system fully. The failure to intervene in these matters allows systemic violence to flourish. New xenophobia is intricately linked to this failure of governmental systems utilised by influential people for capital and more power, as it reflects the growing societal divisions and the marginalisation of certain groups based on factors such as religion, caste, and ethnicity. The exclusionary and discriminatory practices that arise from such systemic failures can be understood as manifestations of xenophobia. However, when leaders or businessmen intentionally exploit such practices for their benefit, it becomes new xenophobia which is hidden due to the vastness and complexity of the systems; recognizing and identifying systemic violence becomes challenging as it is embedded within the very fabric of social, political, and economic structures pronounced and diverse social systems. This makes the prevalence of systemic violence perpetrated by new xenophobia more dangerous and widespread in India than in more developed and homogenous societies like Denmark.

In *Night of Happiness*, the communal violence between Hindus and Muslims, which is primarily driven by imagined threats and constructed binaries between Hindus and Muslims, reflects deeper, symbolic divisions that fuel the animosity between the two communities. In this sense, the conflict is rooted in representations of identity and otherness, with violence

expressing these symbolic constructs. New xenophobia plays a central role in this conflict, as it exploits these imagined distinctions and contributes to the creation of a climate where violence is perceived as both justified and necessary. Similarly, in *The Body by the Shore*, Jens Erik demonstrates how the symbolic nature of conflict manifests in social tensions surrounding immigration. Erik's complaints about the loudness and perceived inappropriate behaviours of immigrants are not grounded in any material threat or genuine cultural difference but instead in the symbolic representation of immigrants as intruders or outsiders. His discomfort is rooted in constructed notions of cultural purity and social order, wherein the presence of immigrants disrupts an imagined national identity. These perceptions, though not based on tangible threats, lead to the marginalisation and exclusion of immigrant communities, mirroring the larger patterns of xenophobic behaviour that grow from symbolic conflicts. The interaction between imagination and reality thus exposes the constructed and performative nature of identity-based conflicts, in which the image of the nation, rather than its tangible, material existence, becomes the primary driver of antagonistic behaviour and collective violence.

While India is constitutionally a secular nation, the historical and contemporary violence is mostly based on racial or religious divisions. Fundamentalist heads often intensify these divisions to incite communal violence using their influence. In *Night of Happiness,* the tragic death of Roshni in the Godhra riots is a poignant example of how such ideologically charged arguments, rooted in religious fundamentalism, can lead to brutal violence. Roshni's death, among many others, illustrates the intersection of systemic violence, religious extremism, and the deep-seated social divisions within the Indian systems. Racism and communalism continue to be deeply entrenched in Indian society, manifesting in various forms of social, cultural, and political division. *Night of Happiness* presents the tension between Hindus and Muslims, self and others, and the longstanding historical rivalry between India and Pakistan as central themes fuelling

political divisions. These binary oppositions illustrate how identity is constructed in opposition to the "other," fostering alienation, mistrust, and violence. Similarly, in *The Body by the Shore*, immigrants and marginalised individuals are subjected to horrific, inhuman experiments, leading to their deaths. What links these two narratives is the exploitation of vulnerable individuals to accumulate wealth and power. In both contexts, systemic violence is not merely an incidental byproduct of social tensions or misfortune; it is strategically enacted by those at the top of the socioeconomic ladder. These powerful and influential figures exploit societal divisions, using new xenophobia—whether racial, religious, or economic—as a tool to perpetuate their dominance. Thus, both works illuminate how the pursuit of power and wealth, underpinned by a culture of xenophobia, leads to dehumanising practices and tragic consequences for the most vulnerable in society.

Mehrotra's position as a wealthy entrepreneur functioning within a system that privileges economic power reinforces his role as a perpetrator of new xenophobia. His decision to dismiss Ahmed was driven not by emotional or psychological distress but by the need to protect the perceived stability of his business. By relying on facts fed to him by others and interpreting them through a narrow, profit-driven lens, he perpetrates systemic violence, as he asserts that "facts are always dangerous weapons, especially in the absence of context" (2016, 137). So, the system driven by economic interests can obscure moral understanding and contribute to the perpetuation of systemic violence in new forms of xenophobia as new xenophobia. The chapter shows how abstract and distorted interpretations of reality through new xenophobia can obscure the human suffering underlying economic decisions. Mehrotra, despite his liberal behaviour and concern for Ahmed, creates violence which is inherent in capitalism, highlighting the ideological core of contemporary capitalism, which sees power and value in abstract, quantitative terms; as Khair suggests, "The self of high capitalism increasingly sees itself and its power in such abstract

terms that it fails to register the inevitable violence of any exercise in (abstract) power" (2016, 5).

Zizek's analysis of figures like Bill Gates and George Soros further illuminates this paradox, critiquing the dual nature of their actions, where their ruthless pursuit of profit coexists with public displays of philanthropy in that humanitarian mask they hide the face of economic exploitation—

> The two faces of Bill Gates parallel the two faces of Soros. The cruel businessman destroys or buys out competitors, aims at virtual monopoly, employs all the tricks of the trade to achieve his goals. Meanwhile, the greatest philanthropist in the history of mankind quaintly asks: 'What does it serve to have computers, if people do not have enough to eat and are dying of dysentery?' (2008, 22).

This critique highlights the hypocrisy of capitalist systems where the pursuit of wealth and power is often disguised as benevolence. This duality is essential in understanding the systemic violence depicted in *The Night of Happiness* and *The Body by the Shore*. The failure to address the root causes of inequality is always silenced by charity, illustrating the deep-seated nature of systemic violence in capitalist societies. In *The Night of Happiness,* Ahmed reveals the dual nature of systemic violence, similar to the two sides of the same coin; however, his actions of exploitation are masked under the harsh realities of a capitalist framework, demonstrating how people in power often manipulate systems for their benefit, where new xenophobia plays a significant role. Similarly, political leaders and religious or fundamentalist heads use xenophobic ideology to further their interests, manipulating social systems to perpetuate their agendas. Roshni's tragic death, orchestrated by a mob leader, or the deaths of poor immigrants by experimenting with their bodies for a better future for humanity, serves as a great example of the devastating impact of such manipulation. This manipulation of social and political systems undermines the foundational

structures that govern society, leading to a cycle of violence that is difficult to measure but deeply felt.

Zizek's critique that "the same philanthropists who give millions for AIDS or education in tolerance have ruined the lives of thousands through financial speculation and thus created the conditions for the rise of the very intolerance that is being fought" (2008, 37) underlines the paradoxical nature of modern capitalist systems. Whether it is Mehrotra's action against Ahmed or Michael and his syndicates' action, who try to change the future of humanity by making the dead supernatural where they can use the body even after death, oblivious in their game of power and capital, they are dehumanising the same humans. However, at the end of the novel, Mehrotra's guilt becomes evident, and he eventually wants to repent for his actions, revealing the extreme moral conflict that emerges from his realisation of his involvement in Ahmed's death without completely understanding his actions of systemic violence perpetrated by new xenophobia. Therefore, despite his guilt, Mehrotra's repentance is nothing before his harm done to Ahmed. His statement, "Maybe there is no other redemption? I will find out. I hope to find out" (154), indicates the futility of such repentance within a system that perpetuates systemic violence through institutionalized structures of power and capital under new xenophobia.

3.7 Conclusion

The question posed in the introduction of this chapter— whether systemic violence is deliberate— can be conclusively answered in the affirmative in most of the cases, as this violence is systematic as the new xenophobia analysed in the narratives operates with clear instrumental intent. People in power trigger systemic violence through their actions, often without recognising the full extent of their involvement in perpetuating harm for more capital power to control. However, due to its hidden and ambiguous nature, this violence remains largely invisible to

those untouched by its harm. In Mehrotra's case, his actions initially appear to contradict the notion of xenophobia, as he presents himself as a generous employer and a sympathetic figure. However, his underlying motivations, shaped by his capitalist interests and the imperative to preserve his financial assets, reveal the instrumental nature of his behaviour. While Mehrotra does not explicitly express xenophobic sentiments, his perception of Ahmed is influenced by economic considerations—chiefly, the threat to his business interests posed by Ahmed's emotional instability. This perception triggers a series of actions that constitute systemic violence, which, while not overtly hostile or xenophobic in tone, is deliberately carried out in a way that reflects a deep-seated indifference.

The violence is implicit in Mehrotra's disregard for Ahmed's emotional distress and his willingness to fire him from the job to preserve the financial stability of his business. Mehrotra's ultimate recognition of his involvement in Ahmed's death— expressed in his self-reflective question, "What if the failure was mine? What if it was my failure to see, feel, smell, touch- a lack Ahmed could not have imagined or expected after all those years we had shared?" (151)— signals his belated awareness of the deliberate violence embedded in his actions. His realisation shows the deliberate nature of systemic violence, wherein individuals, often without explicit animosity, perpetuate violence through the structures of inequality and harm.

This chapter concludes that political propaganda that incites subjective violence often functions side by side with systemic violence, with capital serving as a critical force behind both. The power derived from capital becomes a fundamental driving force in political agendas, where the pursuit of wealth and control functions as a central milestone, inevitably triggering various forms of violence. Therefore, new xenophobia manifests in multiple forms, but capital remains its primary tool to cause violence through economic and social hierarchies. Therefore, excessive money is always one of the prerequisites for experiencing or perpetuating new

xenophobia, as Khair suggests. Still, money remains an integral component of the system that sustains such violence. In complex societal structures, capital acts as a key enabler, orchestrating systemic violence and creating conditions where marginalised groups are exploited, dehumanised, and subjected to systemic oppression. In this new xenophobic world, people will continue to suffer unless a fundamental shift occurs in the collective mindset to embrace humanity and the right to live with equality; as Vijay Nair rightly says, “The harm will always outweigh the good unless... unless every one of them has an equal share in the good” (2022, 171).

CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVISATION OF VIOLENCE IN KHIAR'S NOVELS: *THE THING ABOUT THUGS* AND *JIHADI JANE*

> Stories can knit the world together; stories can blow the world apart: the choice is always ours. —Tabish Khair (2008)

4.1 Introduction

Slavoj Zizek questions, "what if, … humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they speak?" highlighting a relatedness between language and violence by drawing upon Hegel's insight that "there is something violent in the very symbolization of a thing, which equals its mortification" (2008, 61). This idea resonates in Khair's novel, *The Thing about Thugs*, where the narrator struggles with the inadequacy of language to fully confine the human experience— "Can my language dare to choose between the options? Can my language claim to tell all of Amir Ali? ... what I have chosen, what I can choose is never enough, never complete" (2010, 244). Khair suggests that literature functions as a thinking device that continually presses against the limits of language. He defines literature as something written in language and not just about language, which cannot and will not be confined to language (2011, 8). Language is limited in the context of literature and incomplete in its ability to fully convey meaning through linguistic expressions (Khair, 2011, 66); as H. C. Andersen says, 'Music comes in when words fail.' This chapter analyses how language can perpetrate systemic violence when we narrate it in different contexts by reading Tabish Khair's novels, *Jihadi Jane* (2016) and *The Thing About Thugs* (2012) through lenses of "glorification," "thingification," and "symbolic narrativization." It does a critical exploration of how language reflects and actively participates in creating and perpetuating violence when employed in various symbolic and narrative contexts, as they can serve as a potent tool for violence

perpetrating harm by reinforcing stereotypes, silencing voices, or distorting identities.

In language, the enactment of violence is often symbolical as verbal exchanges through debates and arguments rather than physical, leading to aggression inflicting harm through verbal hostility. Zizek points out that "verbal violence is not a secondary distortion, but the ultimate resort of every specifically human violence" (2008, 66), suggesting violence in language is inherent under the guise of civilized discourse. In Khair's novels, this conception of violence extends beyond the verbal into societal structures, as his works trace the precariousness of human existence, where people need survival strategies to navigate unequal social norms. Khair's narratives examine how his characters are compelled to resist or subvert societal conventions, particularly in a world compartmentalised by rigid categorisations and systemic inequalities critiquing the inherent "fundamental flaw" within Western modes of understanding, which are often biased by inherited cultural assumptions and fixed categorisations (*Critical Perspectives*, 2014). Through his literary devices and narrative techniques, Khair creates a sustained tension between visible and invisible, spoken and unspoken, reflecting the complexities and contradictions of human existence inherent in cultural and societal structures.

Amin Maalouf states that "our words are not innocent and without consequences: they may help to perpetrate prejudices which history has shown to be perverse and deadly" (1998, 22), resonating with Zizek's argument that "language is the first and greatest divider," suggesting that how language, instead of creating unity can create a division that allows individuals to ""live in different worlds" even when we live on the same street" (2008, 66). Maalouf further emphasises that the words we often perceive as the clearest can be the most deceptive, noting that concepts like "identity" act as treacherous false friends (1998, 9). In the post-industrial society, Zizek critiques the pseudo-urgency of wealthy philanthropists

reflecting a superficial engagement with issues of justice and equality, which is often devoid of genuine social concern, noting Lacan's contention that "human communication in its most basic, constitutive dimension does not involve a space of egalitarian intersubjectivity" (2008, 62). Instead, Zizek's understanding of language is a site of ontological and social violence where human communication is intrinsically imbalanced, shaped by power dynamics undermining simplistic notions of equality or mutual understanding, far from being a neutral medium where relations of domination are reproduced. In this framework, communication becomes a battleground for power, reflecting the inequalities embedded within social structures and the fabric of linguistic exchange.

Elaine Scarry also addresses this issue by arguing that "pain is inarticulable" in her seminal work *The Body in Pain* (1985), pointing to the inherent difficulty of expressing physical suffering in language. The deep-rooted reality of suffering is frequently obscured by the limitations of language, reinforcing Scarry's notion that pain resists representation. This idea reflects in *Jihadi Jane*, where Jamilla is moved to tears by the sight of Ameena's freshly inflicted wounds on her body but cannot clearly express her agony (2016, 2). This inexpressibility of pain reflects a critical issue within narratives of violence, which often fail to articulate or understand. The very silencing relating to Ameena's wounds shows the exclusion of such narratives, where the personal and embodied experiences of violence remain unspoken and overlooked within larger discourses of conflict and suffering.

In *Narrating Violence, Constructing Collective Identities* (2008), Giti Chandra investigates the intricate relationship between violence and identity, focusing on both individual and collective dimensions. Chandra highlights the distinction between pain and fear, noting that pain belongs to the material or physical realm, while fear exists within the non-material or non-empirical areas (2008, 8). This conceptual differentiation allows her to

question the articulation of pain within the linguistic framework, posing critical inquiries such as—

> Is it possible to identify and understand this gap, this silence within this field, … is it possible to voice this silence, to offer some theorisation as to why pain does, indeed, constitute a separate category in the problems of the linguistic articulation of human experience? (9)

Chandra contends that the pain caused by violence has an inherent demand for comprehension, as it is situated within a broader context that necessitates interpretation and representation through language. Her focus is on the pain that arises from acts of violence rather than the everyday pains of physical injuries or ailments like headaches, stressing how such pain demands deeper comprehension and articulation due to its profound connection to identity and violence.

Bielby and Murer, in their edited volume *Perpetrating Selves* (2018), interrogate whether violence can be perpetuated through linguistic acts or repetitions, particularly examining this through the lens of gender, arguing that "knowledge around violence and perpetration, like all forms of knowledge, is gendered" (2018, 5). This claim emphasises the intersection between violence and the societal constructs that shape its understanding, where acts of perpetration are enacted, reframed, and reconstituted through public discourses, continuously constructing and reconstructing identity and shaping new narratives of violence. Focusing on the narrativization of violence, this chapter analyses how people, in the articulation of identity or self, can justify or legitimise acts of violence. This process of narrative construction enables the perpetration of violence by embedding it within socially and historically contingent frameworks as Bielby and Murer describe perpetration as a "dynamic, relational, and gendered process whose meaning depends on the cultural and historical context in which it takes place, as well as on the audience who makes sense of it" (2018, 11).

Therefore, narrating violence involves not only the representation of violent acts but also the cultural and discursive forces that sanction or condemn them, complicating the process of storytelling and the legitimation of perpetuation.

4.2 Understanding Different Narratives and its Violence

The question of how language perpetrates violence is intricate and multi-layered, as human beings often try to find the meanings and humanity with their bodies, struggling to attach significance to their physical forms. However, the innate nature of one's narrative for one's body shows the inherent meaninglessness at the core of existence— similar to Conrad's depiction of the universe's indifference. An individual carries an identity narrated in various ways, shaping its meaning through social, cultural, and personal factors. The narrativization of identity can serve as an instigator of violence because we narrate our bodies metaphorically, and violence literalizes that metaphor (Chandra 2008). The body can become the site of violence when it is narrated metaphorically, where the subjected physical harm makes figurative or metaphorical language real. The human body is subject to diverse interpretations, which can transform its identity through different forms of narrativization. However, when this body is severed, such as beheading, it loses its meaning in the narratives; for example, expressions such as 'the future is in your hand' become horrifyingly literal in violent contexts when the hand is severed to destroy the implied future as Giti Chandra notes, violence can strip the body of its symbolic meaning when it is separated (chopped off), making it "meaningless," in Stephen Owen's term a "thing" (2008, 9).

In this reformation, the body is stripped of the significance and identity it once held, dismantling all established narratives and making it an object devoid of human value. Chandra further elaborates on this conflict between metaphor and violence, pointing out that the act of dismemberment not only physically separates body parts but also disconnects these parts

from the narratives that once provided them significance, arguing that when the body is mutilated, "the disconnected part becomes disconnected, also, from all the narratives with which the body is surrounded" (2008, 9). Not only this, she asserts that "[o]nce the limits set upon meaning by a particular narrative … are removed, an endless multitude of significations is now possible", further arguing that "it is from this possibility that the true terror originates" (2008, 10). Therefore, the functioning body can be reduced to a literal, fragmented form or thing, creating a heightened sense of fear and uncertainty, suggesting how language can enable certain kinds of violence to be perpetrated upon the physical body. Chandra argues that "such a movement away from meaning into meaninglessness becomes the source of fear" (2008, 9). Those in positions of power effectively manipulate this fear— as explored by the characters like Lord Batterstone in *The Thing About Thugs*, and Hejjiye and Hassan, in *Jihadi Jane*— by exploiting the existential dread to generate a more powerful and compelling narrative force and by doing so, they harness terror to shape and control the society. This terror is particularly acute when society dismisses or overlooks the pain embedded within religious or traditional narratives that justify violence.

One of the ways the narrative of violence works is through the trope of heroism or glorification. Chandra points out that individuals often replace narratives of violence with narratives of faith, asserting that this replacement is indisputable and imbued with meaning derived from an extreme belief in God. In many societies, these narratives of heroism or glorification exist, but when such glorifications are intertwined with radical narratives— mainly religious or ideological ones used by fundamentalists or influential leaders— it encourages individuals to perpetrate violence. The perpetuation of such violence is often perceived as an inherent quality normalizing suffering due to its aesthetic appeal, as such situations enable the transformation of a perpetrator or victor of violence into a heroic agency, masking the complex dynamics at play. However, within this narrative, the perpetrator simultaneously becomes a victim of their own violent actions.

Chandra asserts that such glorification effectively conceals the appearance of the most destructive forms of patriarchy, wherein women are compelled to bear the burden of correcting wrongs inflicted by men and systemic forces beyond their control (2008, 3).

In this context, individuals who go through this violent action maintain the conviction that their bodies, despite undergoing any violent trauma or even death, remain blessed and untainted by their beliefs. To comprehend this intricate interplay between violence (pain) and language (articulation), it is important to examine Scarry's argument that "physical pain does not simply resist language; it actively destroys it" (1985, 4). This statement highlights that an individual naturally engages in a unitary relationship with their body— where the person becomes the signifier and his body signified; however, this relationship is constantly disrupted when the body is subjected to violence (Chandra, 24). Once this unitary signification is shattered, and the correlation between signifier and signified—human and body—collapses, the violated body becomes susceptible to multiple significations or may signify nothing at all. In this transformation, the body, as noted by Owen, becomes a "thing", which is deeply unsettling, as terms such as "nothing" or "thing" evoke terror, illustrating that "the gap between metaphor and materiality collapses irrevocably" (2008, 29). This collapse signifies a disintegration of the distinction between symbol and fact, a phenomenon epitomised in the act of suicide bombing in *Jihadi Jane* committed by Ameena, culminating in the disturbing aspect of violence.

The term "Occidentalism" resists or opposes Said's Orientalism (Zizek 2008, 60), offering a critical framework of Eastern narration to counter the Western discourse. It functions as a reverse essentialism, the same essentializing logic that Orientalism critiques. This reverse essentialism is employed by those who perceive themselves as victims of Western imperialism and cultural hegemony. Therefore, the act of narrating

violence involves not only the representation of violent acts but also the cultural and discursive forces that sanction or condemn them, making narratives a potent tool to justify violence.

The symbolic nature of language can be contaminated by violence under "pathological" circumstances, distorting the logic of symbolic communication (Zizek, 61). Drawing on Heidegger's concept of language as the "house of being," Zizek argues that language holds a "fundamental violence" in its ability to reduce and essentialize identities, thus stripping them of their balanced, original nature (2008, 67). He explores this notion of violence in language, identifying its roots in the "essencing" process, whereby language distorts the nature of things by reducing their complexity to simplified, often partial, representations. In this process, the essence, traditionally viewed as a stable core that defines identity, becomes contingent on historical and linguistic contexts. There is an inherent connection between ontological violence and how language's structuring of reality underpins the social form of domination and inequality. Zizek argues that "Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature" (61), dismembering and destroying their organic unity by inserting the entity into a field of meaning outside its intrinsic nature. I argue that the act of naming something, even unintentionally, constitutes a form of violence, as it objectifies or "thingifies" the original essence of the being in question. Zizek illustrates this point by asserting that gold is transformed into a mere "gold" when it is violently extracted from its myriad connotations of wealth, power, and spiritual purity, the qualities that are entirely detached from the immediate reality of the metal itself (2008, 61). Thus, naming someone through a choice of words not only simplifies and objectifies but also enacts a violent transformation of the original entity's significance and essence.

Zizek posits that the core nature of violence is not defined by "ontic violence"—such as physical suffering, warfare, or destruction— but rather

by the violent nature inherent in the initiation of a new way of communicating the essence of collective existence, the "Essence-disclosure of communal Being- itself" (70). In other words, actual violence or the uncontrollable anger to perpetrate violence lies in the foundational processes that shape and dictate the identity and essence of a community.

People often show a tendency to justify certain acts of violence through some templates or subjective standards. Zizek explains this situation by pointing out that "when we perceive something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the 'normal' non-violent situation is" (64). In this framework, certain acts of violence are trivialised or rationalised to make it acceptable to perpetrate violence as necessary to maintain societal order, suggesting that the perpetrators deserve such treatment. These critical frameworks can bring the cleverest form of violence, as they create a reference point against which some events or acts are categorised as unjust, unlawful or forbidden to justify the violence. In this sense, it becomes inherently entangled in exercising unconditional violence (65). It can be employed for any sacred cause or evil intention through symbolic narrativisation.

4.3 Analysing Narrative Violence in Khair's Novels

The novels *Jihadi Jane* and *The Thing about Thugs*, under consideration for this chapter, portray the intricate fabrication of individual and collective identities, which are intensely connected with narratives of violence. These novels present how literary engagements with violence manifest through the narrative's construction, significantly impacting texts and the real lives they reflect. The act of narrating and the limitations of what cannot be narrated due to the inherent inarticulacy of language are pivotal to this analysis. Both novels venture into how the narrativization of different identities can engender or justify acts of physical violence, focusing on narratological issues, particularly from different media platforms —such as television or newspapers— construct and disseminate

narratives of violence, often through condemning or degrading specific groups or people. These texts disclose the complex interplay between hate speech, violence, and identity, as seen in the conflicts between Daesh and the Kurdish community in *Jihadi Jane* and between Eastern and Western conceptions in *The Thing About Thugs*. The critical question arises: whose violence is recognised as legitimate? Who defines what constitutes violence, and why is a particular kind of violence condemned while other forms of violence are praised, often justified through specific narrative tropes? These inquiries shape our understanding of systemic violence in fictional and real-world contexts.

This society or people tend to define the identity of the human body through their narrow-limited perspective of narrative representation, making the body a part of cultural discourse full of direct/indirect hierarchies and ideological construction (Foucault, 1985), underscoring how bodily identity is shaped within specific socio-cultural contexts. In Khair's novels, there is a duality of focus in the depiction of narrative violence, the violated body and the body as an agent of violence. This duality allows Khair to transcend the traditional perpetrator/victim dichotomy, extending complex ethical assertions without passing any judgment on his characters. As Hillman notes, "the author's refusal to pass judgement on her characters constitutes a deliberate rhetorical move intended to create unease in her readers" (2019, 95), cultivating tension and reflection. A close reading of novels reveals the intricate interplay of violence, religion, and bodily identity, which are all bound to the larger narratives of power, victimhood, and retribution.

In *Jihadi Jane* (2016), which is set in England and Iraq, Khair engages with the pressing contemporary social issues of fundamentalism and xenophobia within orthodox societies. As Roomy Naqvy notes, "The title is a take-off from a real-life person, Colleen LaRose, an American citizen, also known as Jihadi Jane and Fatima LaRose, who was convicted

of terrorism-related crimes" (2018, 228), Khair's novel— where the narrative remains distinct from the real-life figure of Jihadi Jane— traces the lives of two young British Muslim girls, Ameena and Jamilla and their involvement with global jihadist movements, notably ISIS. Khair employs a flashback structure to narrate the novel's story primarily from Jamilla's first-person perspective, narrating her experiences with her friend Ameena, presenting their past characterised by radicalisation, struggle, and violence.

The flashback narrative technique allows Khair to explore the psychological and ideological forces shaping the characters' lives in the novel. A niqab or Hijab wearing Jamilla is portrayed as a conservative yet introspective character who adheres strictly to Islamic traditions shaped by her upbringing in a patriarchal family where women have little or no voice. In contrast, Ameena is raised by a freethinking, single mother, representing the reverse of Jamilla's conservatism, making her extrovert, rebellious and freedom-loving, including defying Muslim customs, smoking, socialising with male classmates, and disregarding societal expectations regarding virginity. However, as the narrative progresses, both girls face personal loss of family and values in society, making them estranged from their own home and society, changing their perspective of life. After experiencing personal crises— notably disintegration from her boyfriend Alex and the estrangement from her mother— Ameena undergoes a dramatic transformation from being an unorthodox Muslim to becoming deeply conservative and ultimately an extremist Islamist, creating tension between her and Jamilla through rigorous study of Islamic texts. This complexity between the two characters illustrates their evolving relationship with faith and identity within the broader context of social and dogmatic pressures.

After her father's death and brother's marriage, Jamilla leaves her family home to stay in Ameena's small flat provided by her distanced father. Having recently graduated from high school and disconnected from their classmates due to their conservative adherence to Muslim traditions, the two

girls find themselves isolated from mainstream social circles. Ameena alienates herself from her close friends through her "bitter diatribes against the apathy of Muslims and the villainy of the West" (52). As a result, both Jamilla and Ameena become increasingly antagonistic toward their school friends, narrowing their social circles. This isolation leads them to immerse themselves in the digital world— particularly the Internet and television— where they gradually become connected with extremist groups through social media via Twitter, befriending Hejjiye, an ISIS supporter. Hejjiye and her Jihadi associates portray themselves as part of a powerful movement of fighters seeking to wage war against the West and retaliate against perceived injustices toward Muslims all over the world.

Over time, they become deeply entangled in the ideological framework of extremist jihad, with the exposure to violent narratives and the promise towards their purpose by adopting the violent discourses they encountered online. Hejjiye, an influential figure in their radicalisation process, broadcasts the successes of jihad on social media, boasting about the triumphs of Islam, declaring, "[w]e are cutting through the infidels and traitors like a hot knife through butter" (2016, 73) illustrating the process of "thingification," wherein bodies are reduced to objects or things justifying violence. Hejjiye represents herself and her husband as participants in a holy war, claiming they are "fighting for the 'faith' in Syria" and that it is the role of women to support their men in this cause (57). This rhetorical framework works as radical ideologies and violent narratives propagated through social media platforms— such as YouTube videos, Facebook, and Twitter posts from orthodox or fundamentalist preachers— drawing Ameena and Jamilla into a radicalised worldview, where they become dedicated to waging war against perceived violence perpetrated by Western ideologies against Muslim communities. They ultimately join radical groups and offer themselves to the ISIS service by marrying fighters and becoming Jihadi brides. For them, the internalisation of these violent and traumatic narratives culminates in their radicalisation, adopting extremist

ideologies to their personal and collective identities as "memories of trauma and narratives of violence and suffering constitute integral components in the formulation of collective identities" (Stratton 2017, 68). Ameena and Jamilla align themselves with the radical cause, increasingly believing they are contributing to the righteous defence of Islam by assisting in the "holy fight" without questioning its purpose or legitimacy. It shows how easily young minds can be brainwashed into violent movements, highlighting the dangerous role of digital media in shaping extremist ideologies.

The infiltration of violent narratives into familial contexts reflected by Jamilla, "I was brought up believing, why read a poem when the Quran contains divine poetry?" (20), encapsulates the deeply ingrained sense of communism in her worldview where her perception of truth becomes unwavering "the one truth, the only truth. I was suckled on that conviction" (1). This narrative of certainty shapes her religious views and social prejudices, where she internalises such a belief system. Jamilla's early experiences with religious interaction further show how the family narrative of religious conviction extends into broader social engagement. During her school years, she actively participated in proselytising organisations, spending her evenings approaching and requesting people to discuss Islam, asking if she "could tell them about the Quran and our prophet, 'pleeese'" (8). Her upbringing is framed by a narrative that positions her religious beliefs as not only absolute but also as a moral and cultural commanding to be shared and defended, reflecting how violent or exclusionary narratives can be rooted in the everyday discourse of family life, paving for radicalisation at an early age.

In the novel, girls have a great reverence for the words of Maulana, a highly esteemed religious figure who says, "For every inch of your flesh that you show, O unveiled woman who claims she is Muslim … there are ten devils appointed to lash you in the hereafter" (40). This declaration serves as a pivotal moment for rebellious Ameena, encouraging her decision

to adopt the hijab and igniting a conflict with her mother, where her mother blames Jamilla's family. However, Mohammad silences her objections by invoking religious authority, citing faith and Quranic teachings as justifications for Ameena's newfound piety. Jamilla later reflects on this perspective, acknowledging the inherent limitations of such teachings, observing, "You cannot really discuss a moderate faith with someone who has an immoderate version of it" (42), underscoring the problematic nature of religious discourse when one side always takes the religious high ground, making it nearly impossible to challenge or question such beliefs. Her critical questions in terms of the examination of faith, power, and violence highlight how religious dogma, when positioned as an absolute and unquestionable authority, can perpetuate exclusionary violent interpretations that leave no room for moderate perspectives, strongly silencing disagreement and reinforcing rigid ideological structures.

Jamilla's reaction to Alex's humorous rhyming poem in class, based on a milkmaid assignment, reveals her deep-seated offence, interpreting the poem as obscene and indignantly declares, "'tis 'bout a sin me God forbids. 'Bout 'dultery. Raight? That's nowt to use for cheap laughter" (16). This misinterpretation makes the teacher request that Jamilla write her understanding of the poem. Consumed by anger, she produces a five-hundred-word essay focusing on themes of adultery, sin, chastisement, depravity, and divine retribution supplied with religious faith, citing the Quran, Hadith, and even the Bible (17). Jamilla quotes the Bible to justify her condemnation, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor the effeminate, nor homosexuals" (17), highlighting how religious texts become a potential tool to weaponise within specific ideological frameworks, supporting narratives of moral superiority and violence. Kimberly Stratton's work on the narrativization of religious texts (Stratton, 2017) is particularly relevant in this context, as it underlines how

religious authorities can misinterpret or manipulate religious discourses, often to justify acts of violence or moral condemnation.

Jamilla's religious understanding and worldview perspective dramatically changed after reading the works of Rumi in Bali, which her English teacher gifted her. Previously, Jamilla and her father used to scoff at Sufism, dismissing Rumi's teachings as blasphemous. Her brother, Mohammad, embraced the same rigid, fundamentalist perspective, asserting that "we just need to believe in God and his last prophet. And just one book, that is it: no useless frills and philosophies" (46). Jamilla's understanding of her faith undergoes a vital transformation after that as initially, she clings to conservative customs, like always keeping her hair covered for men's "sheer curiosity," however, with time, she realises this decision should be a personal choice rather than external pressure. She argues, "I still believe in Allah, don't misunderstand me, but I do not think Allah is a fashion designer. He observes people's hearts, not their clothes" (7), announcing her shift from a rigid religiosity to a more personal and introspective understanding of faith. Jamilla's initial reluctance to join Jihad is gradually overcome by the narrative of faith framed as a righteous and religious duty, "the promise and the vision of joining a righteous fight, of doing my duty as a Muslim" (80). Ameena reinforces this belief, imploring Jamilla to leave their city to live a "meaningful life, based on the Sira, the life of Prophet Mohammad" (83). Hejjiye introduces Ameena to her future husband, Hassan, an ISIS militant, deepening Ameena's immersion in this radicalised environment. Ameena, following Hejjiye's suggestion, somehow persuades Jamilla to join her in leaving England for Syria, where they could marry Islamist fighters and participate in the cause of jihad.

Upon arrival at Hejiiye's place (school), the girls find themselves entangled in a complex narrative of violence that badly alters their course of life. Hejiiye follows a severe educational system in the school designed to indoctrinate the girls through a specific narrativization of violence. She

instructs that "the girls should be taught the Quran and the Hadith, along with Daesh-sanctioned commentaries on these subjects, allotting merely half an hour for prayers and meals" (108). This structured approach not only prioritises ideological training but also aims to reshape the girls' worldviews to orient them with extremist narratives. The curriculum includes a particular class wherein either Hejiiye or a foreign teacher, like Jamilla, presents news that revolves around celebrating Daesh's victories and denouncing Western propaganda (108). This crooked portrayal of events and psychological training catalyses the young mind for violence, ultimately radicalising girls to voluntarily embrace the role of suicide bombers. The internal conflict within this environment is described in Halide's confession, where she states, "I was taught to believe that Muslims neither kill themselves nor kill those who are innocent. I was taught that the Prophet, peace be upon him, said that to kill one innocent person is the equivalent of destroying the world" (141), stressing how the orphanage functions as "a sanctuary and a prison for girls" (147).

Writers often employ realist strategies to unravel the complexities of community and identity, as exemplified by the portrayal of the Muslim community in Syria within Khair's *Jihadi Jane*. Chandra notes that certain texts utilise allied or alternative strategies, such as symbolic representation, to convey deeper meanings; this is reminiscent of the women humming in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In the context of Hejiiye's orphanage school, girls are systematically trained to assume roles as brides for jihadis or as suicide bombers, highlighting the insidious nature of this training. The political implications of such literary tropes emphasise the tragic reality that once characters like Ameena and Jamilla are married or have joined jihad, their capacity to escape becomes severely constrained, regardless of their desires. The narrative reflects an overarching theme that entraps these girls in a cycle of violence and submission, effectively imposing a violent template onto their identities as victims. Chandra cautions against the dangers inherent in texts that address violence, asserting that even when writers or

publishers may not be concerned with the repercussions, "such texts circulate despite their limited reach and have material consequences for real people" (7).

Khair presents a critical investigation of how extremist ideologies manipulate narratives to justify acts of violence, particularly sexual violence like rape against women. Hejiiye dismisses the reports of sexual assault committed by Daesh fighters as "just rumours and Western propaganda" (199), showing her involvement in conserving a narrative that seeks to obscure reality. However, when the systematic rape of Shia, Christian, and Yazidi women by Daesh becomes widely publicized on the Internet, Hejiiye arranges for a Daesh-sanctioned imam to address the girls in the orphanage. The imam's discourse on "Western Misinformation about Rape" works as a grotesque rationalization of these heinous acts arguing that those women were placed under the care of "honourable Daesh fighters," indicating the situations were consensual or protective—

> The women had been given into the care of honourable Daesh fighters, either because the women had so wished, or for their protection; and surely, if a woman, in such circumstances, could not have a husband, she was still safer in the care of an honourable man of the faith, who would satisfy her womanly needs and protect her at the same time (201).

This crafty narrative is very dangerous— preying on the vulnerabilities and belief systems of the orphanage girls— as most of the girls are inclined to accept the imam's declaration without question. The manipulation of religious rhetoric in this context not only normalises the act of rape but also reinforces patriarchal ideologies devaluing women's autonomy and agency.

Jihadi Jane also presents the systemic violence and dehumanization faced by marginalized communities through the character of Sabah, a ten-year-old Yazidi boy who is subjected to the cruel treatment of Hassan, his master. Hassan's disdain for Sabah comes from his hate for lesser culture

as he considers the boy a "devil worshiper," which reflects a substantial narrative that not only dehumanises Sabah but also serves to legitimise acts of violence against him. Hassan's statement, "Should we stone Sabah for worshipping the Devil?" (173), highlights a broader ideological framework wherein religious intolerance becomes a justification for violence. Hassan's interpretation of Islam, described as a "do-it-yourself manual" (176), shows a reductionist approach to religious doctrine that prioritises personal and ideological convenience over scholarly engagement. He dismisses Ameena's academic knowledge of Kuran, revealing a disdain for alternative interpretations of Islam that challenge his rigid/fixed worldview. Hassan follows a "technological Islam" reflecting a mechanistic understanding of faith, where religious practices are followed without any questions dictated by his group (175). The violent acts of the public beheading of Sabah perpetrated by Hassan provide a disturbing manifestation of how violence can be rationalised and institutionalised in the name of divine justice.

Hejjiye's manipulative rhetoric that, "you know that women have a role to play in our struggle" (p. 135) shows a gendered division of labour in the jihadist struggle, wherein women are given the roles of wives, mothers, and daughters, tasked with the domestic and reproductive aspects. By framing marriage to a jihadi as a duty, Hejjiye effectively co-opts the aspirations and identities of young women, channelling their desires into a narrative that serves the broader objectives of the jihadist movement. Her insistence that "some of our girls, the ones who do not marry, and sometimes the girls who marry and lose their husbands… they sometimes offer themselves to the cause" (136) reflects an appalling normalization of self-sacrifice as an acceptable path for women, thereby further entrenching the ideology of violence. The suggestion that such women "will be rewarded" and should be "praised" reveals the subtle ways in which religious and ideological constructs are utilised to valorise acts of extreme violence and self-destruction. The narrative of violence disseminated within the orphanage serves to instil feelings of hatred and anger in the hearts and

minds of the young girls, accelerated through the strategic exercise of repetitive techniques in storytelling, particularly emphasising religious studies such as the Quran and Hadiths. Hejjiye ensures that such discussions revolve around contemporary issues, particularly highlighting the "plight of Muslims in the lands of war" (109), focusing on pain suffered by Muslims, constructing a sense of collective victimhood and reinforcing the notion that the girls have an upright in the larger narrative of conflict.

Moreover, Hejjiye actively handles the girls' exposure to media narratives, positioning herself as an interpreter of these events. For instance, when acts of violence occur, such as the killing or bombing of Muslims, she is present to explicate these tragedies as due to Western Islamophobia and hypocrisy (123). By framing such events in this manner, Hejjiye not only deepens the girls' emotional responses but also cultivates a sense of ideological alignment with the jihadist cause, legitimising violence as a means of resistance. When Halide becomes increasingly aware of their mechanisms to cultivate suicide bombers under the guise of a noble cause, she asserts that "suicide is repugnant to Allah" (136). In response to Halide's resistance, Hejjiye issues a stern command against Halide from spreading her anti-suicide message, revealing the oppressive environment cultivated within the institution, where dissent is met with severe repercussions (136). Halide's refusal to conform leads to her being browbeaten by the other girls, who accuse and ridicule her, transforming her into a target of derision. Eventually, Halide's defiance results in her being confined to a cell without food, and in a further act of violation, Hejjiye arranges for Halide's forced marriage to a jihadi, thereby subjugating her autonomy and reinforcing the narrative that women's roles are to be subservient to the militant cause.

Ameena's experience illustrates this domination when she confesses her crime of hiding the boy in her own home to save Sabah's life. In her confession to Umm Layth, she expresses her sense of weakness by saying,

"Sabah reminded me of the son I do not have, mother. I was weak. I am a weak woman" (186). This admission is strategically framed within the context of societal expectations regarding gender. The older woman ensures that Ameena's actions are judged through the lens of her feminine nature, framing her crime not as an issue of faith and doubt but rather as a reflection of her perceived weakness as a woman (186). Consequently, Ameena is subjected to merely ten lashes in a public place for her transgression, underscoring her inability to contest the dominant narratives of faith and doubt. In this way, her survival is based upon her compliance with patriarchal discourses in such a society.

Ameena's journey of internal conflict reflects her growing tendency to suppress her instinct to oppose and critique (177), which underlines the complexities of her rebellion. Having left her home and former life to challenge what she thought unjust, Ameena now finds herself in a position where her primary concern is the well-being of Sabah, whom she perceives as a symbol of hope and familial connection (178). This transformation points out the moral dilemmas faced by individuals caught in the torture of extremist ideologies. Hassan's orders to execute all "devil worshipers" in the village to make a film and put it on social media like YouTube enact a brutal form of collective punishment (180). Ameena protests against Sabah's execution by arguing that Sabah, having learned the Fatiha, should not be killed as he identifies as Muslim, could not save him, revealing her struggle to reconcile her beliefs with the brutal realities of her environment. Hassan retorts, "[o]nce an idolater, always an idolater" (180), proving his dogmatic belief to a binary understanding of his rigid interpretation of faith, which dehumanises Sabah and dismisses any possibility of redemption. Hassan's physical act of slapping Ameena, which leaves her with a bleeding nose when she challenges his decision, signifies not just a moment of domestic violence but a broader mechanism of patriarchal dynamics of oppression that forcefully silences disagreement and enforces assents (181).

Ameena's final strategic decision to kill her husband, Hassan, by becoming a suicide bomber and rescue Jamilla emphasises the complex interplay between identity and violence within extremist narratives. The reaction from the other girls and women upon hearing Ameena's planned sacrifice —filled with exuberant acclamation and an immediate rush to congratulate her— reveals a troubling cultural effect where acts of violence are celebrated and framed as noble or heroic (210). This glorification of violence— reflecting an inclusive societal support of self-sacrifice— reinforces that such sacrifices are commendable and essential expressions of religious and ideological commitment. The belief that "life was a gift from Allah and hence priceless, and that only Allah had the right to take life as only He could give it" (213) serves to legitimise acts of violence committed in the name of faith. Ameena's decision of such a drastic act of violence indicates the internal impact that radical narratives can have on individual psyches, transforming personal despair into collective zeal for violence. The communal reinforcement of her decision further points out how people can perpetuate cycles of violence, where they are compelled to agree to the expectations and values of their social environment.

Giti Chandra references Clastres' *Archaeology of Violence*, particularly his examination of penal colonies in Moldavia, to illustrate the extreme relationship between the body and the law, where a prisoner is compelled to enact self-punishment, thereby inscribing the law onto his own body. Clastres asserts that "his body writes decree" (29), a metaphor that stresses the notion of individuals becoming agents of their own subjugation. Khair vividly reflected this condition in the orphanage school in *Jihadi Jane*, which serves as both a prison and a site of indoctrination. The girls, while subjected to the rigid rules imposed by Hejjiye, simultaneously contribute to the perpetuation of this oppressive system through their compliance. Halide, a foreign language teacher in the orphanage, explains the structured roles assigned to the girls— they are either groomed to become brides for jihadis or trained to execute suicide attacks (138). She

further explains the system within the orphanage, identifying three different categories of women— older women who serve as educators or affiliates of jihadis, younger women prepared for marriage, and girls who are not beautiful and are conditioned to become suicide bombers (138). The practice of celebrating the deaths of those who become "martyrs" is symbolic of the grotesque valorisation of sacrifice, as evidenced by the rhetoric surrounding a girl who has blown herself up as a suicide bomber (129). The ritual of reciting prayers for her soul, despite the gruesome nature of her death, illustrates a deeply ingrained denial of the violence inherent in these actions. This categorisation highlights the systematic dehumanisation and objectification in the multifaceted ways in which women are manipulated and controlled within extremist frameworks, making them instruments of violence.

Despite the evident coercion and indoctrination, Jamilla's initial reluctance to acknowledge the reality of the girls being groomed for violence exhibits the complex systemic realities. She argues that suicide bombers are only utilised as a "last resort" against perceived enemies and rationalises their actions as forgivable in the eyes of Allah (138), exemplifying the internalisation of violent narratives, wherein self-sacrifice is framed as a noble endeavour. Jamilla's dismissal of the extremity of the situation—comparing it to a conspiracy theorised by the far right in Europe—serves as a mechanism of denial, allowing her to distance herself from the harsh realities of the violent ideology in which they are entrenched (138). Eventually, their compliance with the narratives of violence reveals the oppressive structures around them that shape them, wherein they also engage in the construction of their destinies through a lens of trauma and indoctrination. Jamilla's troubling observation of the incidents of girls disappearing from the orphanage, often told politely that they have "married a jihadi" (129), highlights the systematic normalisation of their subjugation as the frequent disappearance of girls becomes an accepted part of the institutional landscape.

After facing a course of extreme violence and personal loss, Ameena's decision to blast herself as a suicide bomber represents a culmination of her patience and experiences, particularly her desire for vengeance against Hassan and his fellow jihadis for the beheading of Sabah. Jamilla's statement, "I have seen too much violence; I heard too much religion" (234), stresses her profound disillusionment, illustrating the psychological toll of her experiences. Ameena's self-sacrifice is not just about her rage but also her sense of loyalty and responsibility for her best friend, Jamilla. She also found her involvement in Jamilla's suffering a potent cause for her drastic decision. She believed that killing Hassan would enable Jamilla's escape from the oppressive circumstances that have trapped them both.

Khair's *The Thing About Thugs* (2010), framed as a crime thriller revolving around a series of beheadings committed by masked villains, narrated by Amir Ali, an Indian Thug who is not really a thug, portrays a multi-layered and complex narrative investigating the intersections of crime, imperialism, and cultural representation in late-Victorian London. The novel explores the intricate dynamics of human interaction and the collision of Eastern and Western cultures, where London is portrayed as a city packed with drugs, pubs, and prostitution, standing on the brink of moral and social decay. Beneath its facade of civility lies a sordid reality where supposedly elite 'civilised' engage in violent and illicit crimes. The figure of the head cannibal, who preys upon poor immigrants and decapitates them, serves as a central theme by which Khair critiques imperial violence and its dehumanising effects. Through its protagonist, Amir Ali and his diasporic experiences, the novel interrogates the East-West binary and its oppressive consequences for impoverished migrant populations, especially from India. The novel's opening metaphor, "Ghosts are said to be white" (1), functions as a pointed critique of the West's ideological and racial supremacy, deconstructing the Western imperial imagination. By revisiting and reframing colonial history, Khair destabilises

the dominant Western discourse that has long justified racial oppression and violence.

The novel disturbs the master-slave dichotomy, challenging the colonial narratives that have historically othered and defamed the East by calling into question the very foundations of Western civilisation's claims to moral superiority. Rahul Chaturvedi's (2014) observation of Amir Ali as an "Indian Caliban" is particularly notable. Amir's fabricated narrative reverses the Western civilizational order and confronts the constructed nature of the Thuggee myth and imperialist historiography that perceives Indian Thugs as violent criminals to legitimise colonial rule on the verge of racial and cultural oppression. Khair's contention that "the locks on the past can be opened with keys that lie buried in the present" (2010, 4) suggests how contemporary forms of oppression and violence are deeply rooted in these historical narratives. Amir Ali's crisis resonates with Amin Maalouf's reflections on the complexity of identity, where he argues that identity "cannot be compartmentalized" and is composed of many intersecting components, that identities are unique composites of diverse influences and that those with more complex identities are often marginalized or misunderstood (1998, 2-3). Amir's narrative illustrates the inherent tension between the multiplicity of identity and the external pressures to conform to a single, coherent self, leading to his sense of dislocation and alienation.

Khair's complex narrative of temporal and spatial dislocations explores the themes of displacement, identity crisis, and xenophobia by navigating past and present life, allowing him to recount layers of Amir Ali's traumatic connection to India alongside his experiences of marginalisation and suffering in England. Khair's anti-colonial discourse is intricately woven into this novel through themes of migration, alienation, and the racialised power dynamics in Western societies. Khair's use of metafiction is central to the novel's structure, which helped him cunningly present Amir's fabricated stories about the murderous Thuggee cult,

carefully concealing his personal truth. Amir's manipulation of his identity stresses the precariousness of the immigrant experiences in a hostile land, as his diary, written to his lover, Jenny, in epistolary style, offers glimpses into his inner turmoil and struggles, providing a more intimate portrayal of Amir's emotional and psychological conflicts, juxtaposing his fictional tales of Thuggee violence. Amir's narration of the violent Indian Thugs is part of a transactional relationship with Captain Meadow— a British officer who strives to write a work of fiction on the Indian Thuggee cult— who offers Amir shelter in exchange for his cooperation in narrating his life as a thug for his phrenological society.

However, the narrative of the novel takes a critical turn following a series of real beheadings in the streets of London, after which Amir becomes the primary suspect despite the lack of evidence or any investigation. His later imprisonment reflects the xenophobic underpinnings of Victorian society, where suspicion and fear of the racial other lead to unjust persecution. Amir's fate is symbolic of the broader immigrant experience in the novel, where marginalised figures, including Lascars, sailors, beggars, pickpockets, and Ayas (maids), exist in a perilous state, deprived of necessities such as housing and food, probing a powerful indictment of imperialism. The novel critiques the corrupting influence of wealth and power in the novel through figures like Lord Batterstone, who exploits the vulnerability of the poor for personal gain and entertainment, manipulating societal structures by employing third-party criminals while preying on the poor for money. Batterstone and other members of the phrenological society turn the suffering of the impoverished into a form of grotesque entertainment, reducing marginalised individuals to mere objects for experimentation. Khair exhibits the terror inflicted upon the city's poor through the omnipresent fear of a mysterious figure who chops/eats the heads of people, reinforcing the social divide between the powerful and the disenfranchised: the old woman's ominous proclamation "He'll come to it"

(14) embodies the prevalent anxiety and horror experienced by the marginalised communities.

The colonial archive is saturated with Western perspectives that exoticize, criminalize and other the Other of the East; the protagonist encounters numerous books in his grandfather's library— "Taylor's Confessions of a Thug, William T. Meadows' Notes on a Thug: Character and Circumstances, Wells' How to Read Character, and Mayhew's voluminous accounts of the London poor" (3)— which reveal how texts written by Western authors, serve as control mechanisms, reinforcing imperial narratives that depict Indian Thugs as inherently violent and dangerous. By foregrounding these works, Khair critiques how colonial narratives have been employed to justify both physical and epistemic violence against colonised subjects, as we witness in the novel Amir along with other migrant characters such as Gunga, Qui Hy, Karim Bhai, and the lascars known as 'jahajibhai' suffered in the streets of London illustrating the harsh realities Indian immigrants face in England. Khair exposes the deceptive nature of colonial promises with false assurances of prosperity for the immigrants, only to be abandoned and left to die as beggars in an unforgiving and xenophobic society, deconstructing the ideological foundations of colonialism and its ongoing impact on the marginalised.

Khair offers a scathing critique of Western intellectuals' pseudo-scientific practices in exploring phrenology, a nineteenth-century practice that claims to read human behaviour and character by examining skulls. By centring phrenology as a critical theme in the novel, Khair interrogates how such pseudo-sciences were complicit in sustaining colonial ideologies and perpetuating violence against marginalised bodies, where civilised societies can rationalise atrocities through a singular, one-dimensional understanding of human identity, where the poor and the racialised Other, becomes a commodity for their profit and entertainment. The most violent acts, beheadings, most darkly point out this reduction of human life to a material

object. The narrator reflects on the Western construction of knowledge by referring to the "rumours of the story" he first encountered in his grandfather's library (2), stressing how narratives are often based on distorted truths that create fear and panic, leading to violence.

Khair further complicates the reliability of these narratives by questioning their authenticity as the narrator says, "[l]ike the authors of those other characters, I write from between texts and spaces, even though I am located in the space of their narration and they in mine" (5), reflecting the instability and hybridity of the narrative, which cannot be completely authentic nor detached. The self-reflexive questioning of the narrator's own authenticity— "your doubts about my authenticity. I accept your doubts with a doubtful smile" (5)— emphasises Khair's awareness of the constructed nature of all narratives, including his own. Amir exemplifies this theme of narrative construction in his dialogue with Captain Meadows, where his narrative manipulation satisfies the expectation of the preconceived notion of the Western audience—

> 'You ask me, sahib, for an account of my life; my relation of it will be understood by you, as you are acquainted with the peculiar habits of my countrymen; and if, as you say, you intend it for the information of your own, I have no hesitation in relating the whole...' (9).

Khair critiques the commodification of the human body through the character of John May, whose outward polished appearance of a gentleman hides the reality of a man involved in the dark business of human skull with Lord Batterstone illustrating the hypocrisy of Victorian society, where wealth and status often mask moral depravity. Lord Batterstone, a wealthy and respected phrenologist, epitomises this moral hypocrisy where John May's discussion of his role in procuring heads for Batterstone's phrenological studies is evident: "It is difficult to find Things, especially after the affair of the Italian boy, and you, M'lord, want only part of them

and on certain conditions...” (18). This discussion of human beings as mere ‘things’ highlights the reduction of humans, exemplifying the objectification of the body. Amir’s idealised vision of London as the height of civilisation and the ‘mother of cities,’ the jewel of the empire, contrasts sharply with the dark realities of its hidden violence and corruption, critiquing imperialism, which often disguises its violent practices behind the face of progress and civilisation.

The practice of phrenology, which claims to understand human behaviour and character through the study of skulls, becomes a powerful tool of domination and exploitation. The conversation between Major and Batterstone reveals the earlier’s belief in the pseudo-science of phrenology, “Once you know how to read the skull, you have your man […] God has made the skull to fit the brain: if you read the covering, you read the content. It is as simple as that” (151), reflects the broader imperialist fascination with racial typologies. The boss, Batterstone, is entirely indifferent to the ethical implications of his gruesome trade, as he is ready to pay “five times more” for the human skulls, or “Things,” regardless of how they are procured or what becomes of the remains (18). By reducing human beings to objects of study, phrenologists not only dehumanise their subjects but also reinforce the racial and cultural hierarchies where the trade of head is glorified as a “noble profession” for the sake of advancing so-called scientific knowledge.

Batterstone’s pride in his macabre collection of skulls—ranging from “long skulls and short skulls, skulls of bone and cast skulls, skulls as smooth as marble and skulls knobbly as old oak” (23)— are catalogued and displayed not for the sake of genuine knowledge but to assert racial dominance and celebrate the cultural superiority of the European intellect. The collection symbolises the dehumanisation inherent in colonial and racial hierarchies, where the skulls of the poor and the colonised serve as specimens in the theatre of scientific spectacle. For Batterstone, this “Theatre of Phrenological Specimen” represents his lasting contribution to

both science and his family's name, furthering his legacy at the expense of the lives he exploits. Batterstone's desire to solidify his authority within the scientific community is juxtaposed with Captain Meadows, who returns from India determined to prove his understanding of the "Thug" and their inherent cruelty. This competition between Batterstone and Meadows highlights the imperialist framework that underpins their scientific endeavours, where the dehumanisation of the colonised becomes a means to assert personal power and authority within the elite circles of London society.

The relationship between Amir Ali and Captain Meadows underlines the asymmetry of power in colonial encounters, as Amir's statement, "life, sahib, is dear to everyone" (25), exposes the complexity of his character as he narrates his past involvement in the violent rites of the Thugs to satisfy the grotesque curiosity of Meadows. Despite having any connection with the Thuggee cult, Amir continues to tell these stories, fully aware that his storytelling becomes an act of survival in London rather than a confession of guilt as he crafts a narrative that caters to the colonial imagination, where Thuggee becomes an exotic and dangerous other. Amir understands that Meadows judges his story based on his reason as his god does not operate according to the same principles, suggesting that the Western conception of reason is both foreign and irrelevant in Indian land: "For Reason told me that in the land of Hindoostan, all is built on the scaffold of superstitious faith" (26) highlighting the deep cultural divide. This contrast between Eastern faith and Western reason critiques the colonial discourse that portrays the East as irrational and backwards while positioning the West as the epitome of enlightenment and progress. Amir's narrative of claiming to have grown up "among men not afraid of killing other men" (25) illustrates the tension between the truth and the performance of identity. The novel deconstructs the notion that reason is an objective and universal truth, but instead, it is wielded as a tool of imperialism to justify violence. Amir's recognition that his narrative will be

judged based on the "guidance of Reason" highlights the futility of communicating his truth within a system that is fundamentally biased against him. Amir's god— whether Allah or a bloodthirsty demon like Bhowanee (25)—becomes a symbol of resistance to the imperial logic of Western rationalism.

Meadows's insistence on dressing Amir Ali as a 'real Indian,' "Oriental despot", or Nabab (prince) during public events is symbolic of the colonial gaze that seeks to exoticise and commodify non-Western identities. The invocation of the Goddess Bhawanee in Amir's ceremonial worship further amplifies the exoticism of Meadows with the raw material to craft a sensationalised account replete with "spices" intended to cater to the Western imagination. Amir compares the inheritance of violence to the natural processes of a mango tree growing from a mango stone (seed), asserting, "[i]n the land of Hindoostan sons follow in the footsteps of their fathers" (26) emphasises the predestined view of identity that imbues both his self-perception and the perceptions held by British people. Amir's acknowledgement that "reason does not speak in my ears but gives me ears to listen with" (25) signifies a complex relationship with the concepts of rationality and understanding imposed by colonial powers. Amir's narrative is marked by suffering and alienation, particularly his beloved Jenny's inability to read his letters, "[y]ou cannot even read your own alphabets, let alone this cursive Farsi script" (30), serves as a poignant reminder of the cultural and linguistic divides that complicate livings. Amir's tension between authenticity and performance, particularly his anxiety that no one might know his reality, summarises the tragic irony of his existence where he is trapped within the narratives of others, his true self obscured by the roles he is compelled to play. Through Amir's internal conflict, Khair critiques oversimplifications by interrogating the individual psyche and broader societal dynamics.

How John May describes the corpse as “a well-preserved Thing” or the dead man’s jaws, “a perfect set of grinders,” highlights a chilling detachment from the humanity of the dead. The phrase “death needs time to ripen into art” (37) shows the reality of how violence and death are transformed into commodities within a capitalist framework, where the graveyard, a site of death, becomes a site of disturbing economic exploitation. The wealthy express their disdain for the poor, proposing that migrants should be “removed, sent to the colonies, etc.” (235), revealing the colonial mindset prevalent among the British elite, who view them as the ‘burden of empire,’ as one of Major’s friends cynically comments, “we ship them civilization, … and they ship us problems” (236). The sharp contrast between Amir Ali and Nelly Clennam, the cook in Captain Meadows’s household, points out the tensions inherent in the colonial gaze where socio-economic hierarchy and deep-seated prejudices flourish. Nelly’s perception and hatred for Amir, calling him a “savage” and a “murderous thug,” illustrates the pervasive xenophobia that characterises her worldview (41). Her disdain for harbouring a “nigger” or a “cannibal” reveals the moral panic surrounding the presence of marginalized others in domestic spaces. Moreover, the presence of Jenny, Amir’s lover, complicates the narrative in the novel. Her dual identity as a cleaning woman, both proud and ashamed of her background, reflects the internal conflicts where her aunt raises her in an opium den, which she euphemistically refers to as “Oriental medicine,” Jenny’s life is symbolic of the intersections of poverty, labour, and the cultural stigma attached to her environment (42). The opium den serves as a microcosm of colonial exploitation, where marginalised individuals are both victimised and demonised within the colonial framework.

Lord Batterstone’s obsession with acquiring extraordinary skulls leads Batterstone to compel his accomplices, including John May, Shields, and one-eyed Jack, to search both graves and the public sphere in search of viable specimens. His lamentation— “I must say that I am disappointed, sir.

Extremely disappointed. The subject here is deficient in size and strength" (45)— exemplifies the disturbing, dehumanizing nature of their pursuit of a special skull. John May identifies many potential victims among the marginalized in London— "the beggar outside Hyde Park, the lascar he has occasionally seen selling tracts, or that old woman"—each of whom possesses a skull deemed "exceptionally interesting" for its deformity or uniqueness (49). The underlying horror of this situation is further accentuated by the realisation that these "fascinating" skulls remain attached to "living shoulders" (49), exhibiting a chilling disregard for the lives of the poor and marginalised. John May's cynical reflection that "London is a place of accidents" (49) indicates his intention of the desperate search for "remarkable heads" among the impoverished and elderly where Batterstone would accept the skulls if he remained ignorant of their procurement.

Amir Ali's reflections, "[h]ow easy it is, sahib, to snuff out a life; how easy it is to kill a human being!" (54) deconstructs the profound moral implications of the act of murder where they transform a grievous act into a casual one. By describing the predatory existence of a Thug, Amir says, "What is the Thug's life but a preying upon those weaker than him? Crueller than the tiger, craftier than the fox, with less scruples than a hyena is a Thug" (61), which is paradoxical as he identifies the Thug as a figure of barbarity without any evidence of violence, while simultaneously critiquing the actual perpetrators of violence, the powerful elite like Batterstone. Amir Ali's letter recounting the tragic death of his family at the hands of landlords reveals his acute awareness of the violence perpetuated by the wealthy and influential—

> It is not only the greatest charms that reside in the human heart. So does the foulest evil. And when that heart belongs to the rich and powerful, like Mirza Habibullah, well then, Janam, you should never cease to look over your shoulder. Never (60).

Habibullah, a powerful landlord, exemplifies this predation, having murdered all of Amir's family members in a ruthless bid to seize their land. Critiquing the cultural interpretations of violence and sacrifice of Thugee, Amir notes that the rules of Thugee dictate that life must be offered to Bhowanee as a sacrifice, a belief that Captain Meadows finds acceptable in the context of "the ancient country of Hindoostan" (63), filled with hidden rites and superstitions.

Qui Hy's Dhaba, or opium den, serves as a refuge for Amir Ali and other marginalized people that populate the fringes of London society, including "lascars and ex-slaves, ayahs and prostitutes of the poorest sort, gypsies and stowaways, urchins, and pickpockets" (65), each seeking sanctuary from the oppressive structures that render them invisible. The den thus becomes a microcosm of the social hierarchies and intersections of race, class, and gender that define urban life in colonial London. For John May, the streets of London offer numerous opportunities to source "unusual skulls," as they frequently encounter marginalized individuals— "a gypsy here, a cockney there"—whose heads would be welcomed into Lord Batterstone's collection (126). They get the "knotted skull" (110) in the opium den by beheading an elderly woman. One-eyed Jack's comparison of beheading to "a man slicing a carrot" (113) and his argument for the justification of violent acts, where killing the poor and marginalised is not inherently "sins" (126), remarking, "I think... well, I think if God didn't want 'em slaughtered, he wouldn't've made 'em sheep" (128) underscore the moral disintegration illustrating how violence can be rationalised through narrative frameworks, and divine will as a justification for slaughter, that dehumanise the victims, equating them to animals and thus making their death permissible.

In his letter, Amir Ali reflects on the complexities of narrative and identity, grappling with the moral implications of the stories he has crafted for Captain Meadows by stating that—

> There are moments when I feel guilty about the stories I have embroidered for him. No, I would not say I have lied to him, for I have told him what he wanted to hear, stitching together a colourful garment from the threads and patches of stories heard here and there, in my village and in Patna (122).

This confession highlights the performative nature of storytelling, where truth becomes malleable and subject to the audience's desires. Amir's recognition that "we are lied to only to the extent that we want to believe in the lies" (123) shows a fundamental aspect of human interaction where the collaboration of both the storyteller and the listener fabricates the narratives. Amir further tells the precariousness of self-identity within the framework of storytelling— "When I had spun him a story about Habibullah being a thug, I had not realized I was spinning myself into a web of my own making' (124)— by positing that "stories, true or false, are difficult to escape from, jaanam" showing the inherent power of narrative to bind individuals to their own creations by concluding "[I]n some ways, all of us become what we pretend to be" (124).

Daniel Oates, a journalist with significant influence, constructs a sensationalised narrative around the recent beheadings, suggesting they bear the hallmarks of "a heathenish rite" (130), invoking the authority of men who have witnessed such practices in various parts of the empire. Oates reinforces the imperialist notion that these acts of violence are intrinsically linked to the so-called "savage" cultures of colonised peoples. His suggestion that "one such savage might be here in our midst, perhaps walking next to us on the streets, dressed in the civilised garments of an Englishman" (130) implicitly targets Amir Ali, positioning him as the perpetrator of these brutal crimes in London. This rhetoric not only racialises the crime but also serves to instil fear among the British public against 'other' hiding within their society. Oates further inflames these racial anxieties through his shocking journalism, describing the crime

typically associated with “other, hotter climes” and “people reared on superstitions and barbarities” (137). In contrast, he characterises England as a land of “civilisation” where the “milk of human mercy” flows through Christian veins, thereby establishing a dichotomy between the civilised British and the barbaric foreigner (137), feeding into the broader imperialist narratives. Oates’s portrayal of the criminal as “a cannibal who consumes the heads of his hapless victims” (137) further dehumanises the presumed perpetrator, transforming him into a monstrous figure. His rhetoric, clearly aimed at generating moral panic, leverages the colonial stereotypes of Asians and Africans as primitive and violent, implying that such heinous acts are the result of ritualistic practices from foreign lands. Through these narratives, Oates not only shapes public perception of the crime but also perpetuates the larger colonial discourse that exoticises and demonises non-Western peoples, entrapping them as inherently barbaric.

Though Meadows is “convinced of Amir’s innocence, he had his doubts about the authorities … and he did not trust the London mob” (153), growing anxious about his safety when beheadings increase. The situation escalates as the sensationalist reporting of Daniel Oates, with headlines about “the murderer, the beheader”, dominates the news, intensifying public pressure on the government to act. Despite knowing that Amir is innocent, Major Grayper feels compelled to arrest him, stating, “he is the only suspect we have, and after this article, it might be safer to put him behind bars than to let him roam free on the streets” (166). The police arrest Amir not based on evidence but to appease an anxious and misinformed public, reinforcing how racialised fear, fuelled by media sensationalism through narratives of hate and violence, leads to the criminalisation of the innocent.

Upon his arrest, Amir says, “[t]wo of them made to grab me; I resisted, […] they showered me with blows and curses” (169), highlighting the excessive and brutal treatment he faces at the hands of the police. In their plan to uncover the real murderer and save himself from the attacks of

the public and the threat of police arrest, Quy Hy and Amir Ali take the help of an underground network— "the lost tribe of London," also known as the "Mole People" (195)— a marginalized group living in the tunnels beneath the city. Amir's world is shattered when he learns of Jenny's brutal murder, having been clubbed and garrotted, making him vow to exact revenge: "I swear I will kill him, if that is the last thing I do" (82). Qui Hy, recognizing the depth of Amir's pain and the gravity of the situation, mobilizes her vast network of marginalized individuals— "a ragtag army of ayahs, lascars, whores, opium addicts, gypsies, and servants of the lowest order" (221). Her influence within these communities is formidable, and her message travels swiftly through London's underworld, as her husband acknowledges her far-reaching influence, noting that her words can penetrate "the realms of invisibility," a hidden networks that operate beneath the surface of the city's visible power structures.

In the moment of extreme existential crisis when life becomes entangled with lies, Amir confesses to Jenny how prison has altered him, making him feel as though he has become the very story he narrated: "Suddenly, I was the thug I had claimed to be" (201). This conflation of fiction and reality leaves Amir questioning the role of language and narrative in shaping identity and experience. He begins to fear that his invented tale has summoned a real murderer, who is now committing the gruesome acts he falsely claimed as his own. This shows the growing uncertainty about the boundaries between narrative and reality, questioning, "Are we then nothing but the playthings of language? When do we tell stories, and when do stories tell us?" (202).

Oates, ever eager to sensationalise the ongoing crimes, seizes upon the latest beheadings to stoke public fear and xenophobia as he writes, "It has been whispered in the streets that the murderer is some heathen, recently imported into our parts, who either practices a devilish and esoteric rite or consumes human flesh" (237). By framing the murderer as an exoticised

foreigner, Oates reinforces colonial stereotypes that associate non-Western cultures with barbarism and savagery. His narrative of violence reflects a broader societal impulse to scapegoat immigrants and imperial subjects for the city's ills, positioning them as the Other who threatens the moral and social order of "civilised" England.

Upon discovering that Lord Batterstone is the purchaser of the skulls, Amir is consumed with rage and vengeance to kill him. However, Qui Hy intervenes, urging him to reconsider, stating that Lord Batterstone is not directly responsible. Amir vehemently insists, "I know such people," recalling with bitterness how his own family was destroyed by wealthy and powerful individuals through middlemen: "[t]hey always act through their henchmen" (250). Amir's anger is not just personal but symbolic of the broader injustices perpetrated by colonial elites, who maintain their authority and exploit the vulnerable through layers of conspiracy, thereby distancing themselves from the brutality they incite. Through the tireless efforts of Qui Hy and her network of spies, John May, Shields, and Jack are finally apprehended. Following their arrest, Daniel Oates publishes a report proclaiming,

> The Rookery Beheader has been apprehended, […] the beheadings which have plagued our fair city could be attributed either to the old and deplorable profession of Resurrectionists or to some Oriental cult. We are glad to report that our first conjecture has been proved entirely correct (269).

Journalist's report, while acknowledging the arrest of his own people, nonetheless reveals lingering suspicions about oriental involvement, demonstrating how narratives steeped in xenophobia continue to shape public perceptions. His language maintains a subtle yet persistent bias against Eastern communities, suggesting that the potential for violence still lies with foreign or "exotic" elements despite the clear evidence suggesting English criminals. Oates' reporting also exemplifies how violent narratives

not only shape societal fears but also perpetuate racial and cultural stereotypes, leading to real-world consequences.

4.4 Discussion of the Narrativisation of Violence

The dualism of language regarding 'pure versus impure' constructs the West as a morally and ethically corrupting force, justifying extremists and violence as acts of purification and liberation, not only fuels radicalisation but also simplifies complex socio-political realities into binary oppositions, effectively dehumanising self and other. Where different social media intensify their sense of alienation, where the West is the ultimate enemy of Islam. Zizek's concept of Occidentalism critically points out how counter-narratives, framed as oppositional to Western hegemony, can perpetuate the same essentializing logic that Orientalism critiques. This inversion of Said's Orientalism demonstrates that the construction of identity through the negation of the Other—whether East or West—remains deeply implicated in cycles of violence and alienation. Zizek's observation that "a certain ideological vision of the West" is constructed within Muslim countries, which distorts Western reality in a manner akin to how Orientalism distorts the Orient (2008, 60), provides an essential framework for understanding the dynamics of radicalization in *Jihadi Jane*. Zizek's example of the Danish cartoons is an apt example of this distortion, where an offensive depiction of the Prophet Muhammad ignited a wave of violence not as a direct response to the images themselves but to the broader ideological constructs they came to represent (2008, 60).

Ameena and Jamilla, in *Jihadi Jane*, embody this Occidentalist lens to perceive Western countries through a narrative of moral and cultural decay. Ameena expresses her frustration over "her inability to do anything to change the world, to protect other Muslims from being attacked by a crass, vulgar West" (33). Her perception of the West, reinforced through TV consumption and ideological influences, radicalises her worldview, culminating in her desire to "fight" against the West's perceived enemies:

"The Israelis, Assad, the Americans, the Iranians ... whosoever needs to be smashed" (38). Jamilla's father furthers this narrative of the West as a site of impurity, a space devoid of faith, positioning England as an "island of impurity" (24) as opposed to the "nation of the pure." This stark division between the faithful East and the corrupt West is inherited by Jamilla and her brother Mohammad, who, as she notes, "had grown up with that burden to cement their faith" (24). The father's perception of being besieged by Western secularism and the threat it poses to Islam is transmitted to his children, solidifying their Occidentalist worldview. Jamilla reflects on how these views were deeply entrenched in their upbringing: "Mohammad and I had grown up listening to such opinions about Islam and the West from our father" (32). This division is further reinforced by the rhetoric used by Hejjiye, who positions Ameena and Jamilla as part of "the tens of thousands of true Muslims" who are "captive in the West" burning to join jihad (97).

Whether it is Zizek's reflection on the violence sparked by the Muslim community's reaction to the caricatures of Muhammad or fuelled by a complex network of symbols and images associated with the West mirrors Ameena's emotional trajectory. In both cases, the violence is not a response to the immediate stimuli—whether cartoons or specific events—but to the symbolic web of meanings attached. This highlights how ideological distortions can create a fertile ground for radicalisation, where individuals like Ameena are drawn into extremist movements as a means of restoring a perceived sense of dignity and justice.

The perspective of 'ontic violence' offers a critical lens to examine how the embodiment of violence is intricately tied to extremist and radicalized interpretations of the perceived assaults on Muslim communities by Western powers. Heidegger's analysis explains this concept, suggesting that such essential violence serves as a foundational element that either grounds or opens the space for the manifestation of ontic or physical violence (Zizek, 70). Ameena's internalisation of this conflict is clearly

illustrated in the description of her eyes as "liquid and soft but with the shadow of some unnamed hurt lurking in them like a lake of dusk" (7). In Ameena's case, her emotional view is not merely a backdrop to her violent actions; rather, it signifies the deep-seated grievances and traumas that inform her radical ideology. This interplay between her anguish and the broader socio-political context encapsulates how violence is not only a reaction to immediate circumstances but is also entrenched in the collective narrative and identity of a community. Hejjiye in *Jihadi Jane* exemplifies this narrative through her assertion on social media that "women have a role to play in the jihad too," a role defined as that of a wife or mother. She frames this duty as divinely ordained, proclaiming, "[i]t was the role allotted by Allah, and surely what work could match the work given to you by Almighty God!" (75).

Ameena's internal conflicts, her "ghostly eyes where unnamed hurt lurks," can also be understood through the lens of "terrorist (E)motives" introduced by Cotte and Hayward. This concept explains how some individuals may be drawn to terrorism and violence due to underlying existential drives, such as the "desire for excitement," "desire for ultimate meaning," and "desire for glory" (Bielby and Murer, 106). Such motivations can transform terrorism into a life purpose, as ISIS fighters in the novel. Ameena embodies this existential attraction to violence exemplifies her excitement when she proudly shares a photo of her future husband, a Daesh fighter, on Facebook, writing that he "wore a magazine carrier with pockets for grenades and a gun – 'a scoped M4 rifle', informing Jamilla, 'his favourite weapon.'" Her pride in her future husband's militant role highlights her desire and complicity in the ideology of violence for the excitement and meaning that terrorism promises. This desire for excitement and the glorification of violence, often fuelled by extremist narratives, stresses how the radicalisation process in such contexts can be both ideological and deeply personal. Naqvy aptly observes, "For Ameena and

Jamilla, being a jihadi is like being high on psychedelic drugs; it gives them a high, and they cannot abandon their cause" (2018, 230).

Zizek asserts that the core element of racism lies in the fact that the "being" of individuals, whether black, white, or any other group, is fundamentally a 'socio-symbolic' construct (72). Thus, when white individuals treat Muslim communities as inferior, or when Muslims internalise this perception of inferiority, it manifests at the level of their socio-symbolic identity. The white racist ideology enacts a form of performative efficiency, reinforcing this perception of inferiority. This perception is shown in *Jihadi Jane* when an elderly woman berates Jamilla on the bus for her choice of dress, exclaiming, "yew are le'in' down all women, yew idiot" (78). This public humiliation serves as a final blow for Jamilla, pushing her to leave England and join Ameena in jihad. Jamilla reflects on the alienation Muslim women experience in England, remarking that they cannot walk without feeling like "an alien from Mars" (82). This alienation, which emerges from the symbolic field imposed through language, fuels Ameena's radicalisation (60). She perceives Western duplicity, hatred, and condescension as personal insults. This perception is amplified by her exposure to radical preachers on social media, as presented in the novel: "Jamilla and Ameena follow the preachers and speakers on Facebook and YouTube who either preached a very strict version of Islam or highlighted the hypocrisies of the West" (31).

Jamila and Ameena, alongside their Jihadi group, engage in protests against what they perceive as the exploitation of Muslims by Western powers. However, as Zizek posits, their actions do not simply address a straightforward reality; instead, they are responding to a constructed narrative of their predicament, a narrative shaped and articulated by influential figures such as Hejiiye, as well as by media portrayals and religious authorities like Maulvis that falls on symbolic narrativisation. Zizek asserts, "Whenever a group of workers protests against their

exploitation, they do not protest a simple reality, but an experience of their real predicament made meaningful through language" (67). The chapter shows how Ameena's and Jamilla's radicalisation is not a direct response to individual events, such as the death of a Muslim in Syria or the bombing of Palestine, but instead to the complex symbolic representation of the West that they have internalised. In their lived experiences, there is no evidence of genuine oppression or physical violence before their involvement in this symbolic struggle against the so-called impure West. Their decision to join the jihadist movement is less a reaction to tangible adversities and more an alignment with a narrative that imbues their experiences with meaning and urgency.

Zizek elucidates this idea further, stating that "[r]eality in itself, in its stupid existence, is never intolerable: it is language, itself symbolization, which makes it such" (67). Hejjiye and her jihadi network, including Ameena and Jamilla, react not to the specific incidents of violence but to the broader ideological figures that these events symbolize. When Ameena accuses Western media of producing "fake news" and urges Mohammad to go and see the reality for himself, the debate escalates to such a degree that it solidifies Ameena's resolve to join the jihadi cause. Thus, the significance of their protests is rooted not in actual grievances but in how their realities have been framed and interpreted through the lens of extremist ideology.

Khair elucidates the manipulative power of the internet within our increasingly interconnected world, where the narration of violence in various contexts can incite individuals to perpetrate violence. The narrativization of terrorism, particularly Muslim fundamentalism, is frequently perceived as an insidious "other" by the Western civilised world. This framing creates a ripple effect of animosity and hatred among the Muslim community and those who identify with it by perpetuating a cycle of alienation and hostility under the guise of religious urgency. Hejiiye embodies a fake urgency and moral outrage, employing a hypocritical

sentiment to propagate her narrative of fundamentalist violence, where she posits a need to "save" Islam and the broader Muslim community from perceived threats posed by the West.

The concept of "thingification" and its narrative strategies are applied in both novels. In *Jihadi Jane,* it is applied to Sabah, whereas in *The Thing About Thugs,* the act of "thingification" aligns with those marginalised and poor individuals attributed to having a grotesque quality of head by John May and his associates justify violence against them. The use of the term "thing" to refer to human skulls reveals a process of dehumanisation, where language itself becomes an instrument of violence, where the use of the term in business discussions, even in public spaces, allows perpetrators to distance themselves from the violence of their actions. By reducing the human head to a mere object —a commodity to be bought and sold— the study illustrates how violent narratives transform individuals into lifeless objects, stripping them of identity and humanity. This linguistic manipulation enables them to speak about human bodies as if they were inanimate goods, thus normalising the brutality of their trade.

The chapter stresses how the illustration of such narratives reduces individuals to mere objects, stripping them of their identity, individuality and humanity. The statement that "Yazidi was indubitable" points out the fixed label assigned to Sabah, reinforcing his status as an outcast within the social hierarchy. Hassan's cruel order, wherein he instructs his eldest son to cane Sabah for perceived transgressions, exemplifies the normalisation of violence within familial and cultural contexts (174). Ameena's attempts to intervene in this cycle of abuse are thwarted by her co-wife's plea for inaction, revealing the pervasive climate of fear and oppression that characterises their lives. The assertion, "you are an educated woman [...] such matters are beyond the understanding of us women. Allah did not make us to understand such things. They are best left to Allah and men" (175),

highlights a prevailing ideology that justifies violence by relegating women to inferiority and passive acceptance of male authority.

Khair's depiction of head trade exemplifies how language can "thingify" human beings, reducing them to mere objects where even trading the human body becomes another negotiation in the marketplace. By punishing perceived traitors and infidels through such brutal means, Hassan not only enforces conformity within his community but also seeks to instil fear as a method of social control. The act of beheading carries profound symbolic weight; it is not merely a means of execution but a deliberate effort to erase identity. His statement, "We need his pumpkin head" (181), reveals his dehumanising view of Sabah, reducing the boy to an object rather than recognising him as a human being with his identity and inherent value. The head, which retains individual identity, is severed from the body, becoming an object devoid of meaning and agency. This transformation shows the dehumanising effects of violence, as the victim becomes a mere "thing," stripped of their former identity and existence.

The journalist, Daniel Oates, finds himself disillusioned when the bloody series of head-chopping murders comes to an unexpected halt. His perverse fascination with the violent acts is evident as he grows disappointed in the criminal's absence, feeling "as if the criminal had let him down personally" (231). Oates's reaction highlights the morbid symbiosis between media sensationalism and public fascination with violence, as he thrives on the grotesque spectacle of crime to fuel his narratives. His discontent reflects a broader critique of the narrativization and media's role in perpetuating violence through the consumption and circulation of graphic stories for public entertainment and sensationalism. Amir's arrest without any evidence connecting him to the crimes underlines the violent narratives of 'symbolic narrativisation' constructed around him by Oates.

4.5 Conclusion

The interplay of identity, language, and religion often assumes a dominant role in shaping affiliations, particularly in contexts where violence is framed as either a form of entertainment or an honourable act. This framing reflects a deeper phenomenon wherein violence, as a concept, is rendered through a linguistic lens, transforming it into a symbol rather than a mere physical reality. In this sense, as Slavoj Zizek articulated, verbal violence is not merely a secondary distortion but poses a more insidious threat than its physical counterpart. The capacity of language to narrate violence allows for its essentialization and symbolization, wherein bodies become reduced to mere symbols or objects, which can be referred to as the thingification of identity. The narratives we construct around our identities—shaped by language—can render bodies vulnerable to violence. Language serves as a vehicle for meaning; however, it is equally capable of deconstructing that meaning when the act of violence is glorified for so-called divine or pure cause by self-destroying bodies, reducing bodies to objects devoid of agency or significance.

In *Jihadi Jane*, Jamilla partly blames herself for Ameena's radicalisation and her subsequent violent death. However, this perspective is diminutive, failing to encompass the other important factors contributing to Ameena's radicalisation. Key among these influences are the emotional and psychological scars caused by her parent's divorce, her fractured relationship with her mother, external pressures from her peers, her mother's strong disapproval of the Islamic scarf, and her search for identity and acceptance within the context of a community that seems to reject her. The loss of her romantic connection with her boyfriend, Alex, adds another layer of emotional distress, leaving her empty and longing for a sense of connection and purpose. The main pivotal inspiration came from the radicalising narratives propagated by influential figures such as Hejiiye and various Islamic preachers, shaping Ameena's worldview. These narratives are often disseminated through social media, wherein the violent discourse

narrates a profound sense of injustice regarding Western countries' actions against Muslim populations and Islamic nations in terms of moral outrage and existential threat that legitimises violence as a means of reclaiming agency and identity.

The narrativization of the Thuggee cult in *The Thing About Thugs* exemplifies the way Western media and literary culture have historically created discourses justifying colonial violence. Aligned with Said's concept of Orientalism, Khair exposes the far-reaching effects of colonial narratives, reflecting the broader ideological manipulations of Western discourse to distort the images of the Orient for their purposes. Khair intricately develops Said's Orientalist framework by portraying the East-West binary as a mechanism of alienation and xenophobia by highlighting how cultural and racial discrimination are intrinsic components of discrimination that manifests in the depiction of Eastern characters as savage, ignorant, and inherently violent. In contrast, Western figures are portrayed as enlightened, rational, and civilised. This dichotomy becomes the foundation upon which colonial violence is justified, as the West's civilising mission is established on the argument of bringing order and reason to the allegedly chaotic and primitive East. Khair's representation of Amir's fabricated stories of Thugs mirrors this larger Orientalist project. Amir Ali could survive there only by crafting his stereotyped narrative of the Thuggee cult, which Western audiences find fascinating and eager to consume. The Western fascination with Amir's stories highlights the imperialist desire to essentialize and categorise Eastern behaviour as inherently violent and exotic. The novel systematically deconstructs this binary between the East and West by challenging stereotypical depictions and racial and cultural hierarchy systems.

Ameena's decision to become a suicide bomber derives much of its narrative energy from the loss of meaning of what she regarded as high and worthy and not from the glorification compared to her sisters, who became

suicide bombers for the sake of saving Muslims from the West's atrocities. The act of violence, such as beheading the Yazidi boy, creates an intense narrative charge, as the physical dismemberment generates a ripple of terror that extends far beyond the immediate act, engulfing those who witness it. Chandra notes that "such a severance signifies, not just the loss of meaning, but 'meaninglessness' itself" (2008, 9). The chopped head, once a symbol of life and identity, becomes a mere object, a "thing", that instils horror and reinforces the fear where Ameena and those who witness this act of violence, the boy's head no longer represents a person, instead becoming an emblem of lasting psychological terror and existential void.

Sometimes, literary tropes employed by the writer to narrate violence from their imagination/symbolism can transform into factual as the chapter noted that its literal facticity cannot be denied, which can manifest violence in some societies because of literary imagination used by writers so powerfully in texts, that 'victims struggle to avoid these ideologies and structures as it becomes their literal truth' (Chandra, 3). The influential narrative imagination writers employ can impose ideologically assumed frameworks incorporated by suffering individuals and communities by shaping their lived realities. Consequently, these fictional constructs, which may initially appear as creative expressions, can evolve into oppressive social truths, legitimising violence and perpetuating harmful ideologies. So, such narratives/truths coming from the fictional worlds need to be dismantled and deconstructed, critically examining their broader societal impact and recognising how the boundaries between fiction and reality blur, often to the detriment of marginalised or victimised groups. In this context, writers and narrators are responsible for deploying any tropes associated with religion, faith, heroism, and condemnation, as the political implications of these tropes cannot be overstated; they possess the potential to legitimise, perpetuate, or even incite violence through their narrativization.

The power of such narratives is further emphasised by Chandra's reminder that, even when violence seems resolved in fiction, "it cannot forget the real and material consequences of literary and popular representations of nations, races, ethnicities, economic or other positions" (6). Chandra's observation resembles Khair's novels, where the harmful effects of misrepresentation and violent stereotyping are laid bare, illustrating how literary and journalistic narratives contribute to a cycle of suspicion, alienation, and violence. The novel's careful depiction of these violent processes foregrounds the destructive impact of dominant narratives, highlighting the responsibility of authors, journalists, and other narrators in shaping and reshaping social realities through their narrativization. By neglecting to theorise or address the pain perpetuated by these narratives, society allows for a deeper entrenchment of violence as Chandra highlights that "pain, particularly that of violence, and violence itself, constitutes a separate category of inarticulacy" (10), emphasising the distinct and often unspoken nature of violence-induced suffering. This inarticulacy of pain caused by violence further complicates how narratives of identity, faith, and tradition perpetuate harm, creating a cyclical relationship between the distinct narration of language and the human body, leading to systemic violence.

CHAPTER 5

HOME AND BELONGINGNESS: A REPRESENTATION AND DISLOCATION OF HOME IN *THE BUS STOPPED* AND *FILMING: A LOVE STORY*

> "Heidegger argues that it is only by being positioned out-side of home that the home and the structures on which it relies can be perceived" (Masgrau-Peya and Elisenda 2004, 60)

5.1 Introduction

Geographical movement has historically defined human existence, yet the yearning for home and belongingness remains one of humanity's fundamental desires. This desire to belong is one of the most fundamental impulses, and home represents the phenomenological foundation where individuals find solace and security from the external world. Food, clothing, and shelter (as the old saying of Bollywood, 'Roti, Kapda, aur Makan') are essential for human beings. Still, unlike food and cloth, humans share a strong kinship with home, an embodied sense of belonging in this disembodied world. Mobility and migration have fundamentally changed the conceptualisation of "home" and its sense of belongingness. In contemporary discourse, home is no longer perceived as a fixed geographical location but is increasingly viewed as the ever-evolving space of individuals across borders. As individuals move between multiple spatial, cultural, and political environments, home boundaries are redrawn, often resulting in fragmented or hybrid identities. This process complicates the idea of belonging, as a home becomes not only a place of origin or residence but also an emotional and symbolic space continually redefined by displacement, adaptation, and the negotiation of new social and cultural landscapes. Thus, this constant mobility and migration necessitate a rethinking of home, positioning it as a constantly changing site of belonging reactive to the complexities of global flows and transnational exchanges.

This chapter analyses concepts of home, representation, dislocations, and non-belongingness leading to systemic violence, focusing on the discourses of Indian nationalism and national identity in Khair's *The Bus Stopped* (2004) and *Filming: A Love Story* (2007) through the lens of third space of Khair in comparison to Bhabha's third space. Khair's novels are intricately interwoven with themes of home, nationalism, and belonging in India; as Benedict Anderson has noted, the emergence of national identity is deeply linked to the novel's temporality (Adorjan 2001, 192). Khair navigates the notion of home as a site of belonging and dislocation; particularly in contemporary India, there is a massive gap between the living styles of rural and urban people regarding their access to stable living conditions. In terms of home and belongingness, home is a temporary and precarious arrangement for many poor people in contemporary India who cannot afford a permanent home. This lack of stability forces a significant portion of the population into geographic mobility, not by choice, but as a survival strategy. Poverty compels constant travels in search of work and sustenance, creating a form of displacement that disrupts the sense of belonging and national identity. Khair's novels explore how this enforced mobility transgresses traditional notions of identity as individuals continuously traverse sociocultural boundaries. In doing so, they reveal the complex layers of dislocation and how India's national identity as a modern nation is shaped by the lived realities of its poorest citizens. The constant movement and the ensuing fragmentation of identity challenge the coherence of nationalism and raise questions about who truly belongs in the imagined community of the nation.

Sarah Allen notes that "[n]o study has examined the relationship between intra-national migration and the meaning and experience of home" (Allen 2008, 85), a statement that is true not only for research on First World nations but also for migration studies and narratives emerging from India. This chapter thus explores the multifaceted concept of home in the Indian context, mainly through the lenses of belonging and nationalism. It will

examine how home, often an illusory or ever-shifting notion, is tied to dreams of stability and nostalgia yet remains elusive for many, especially within the societal terrain of India. The chapter will further investigate the symbolic and practical representations of home in individuals' lives, considering how the notion of home can profoundly shape and alter one's sense of identity and belonging due to socioeconomic pressures, affecting individuals and communities. The dislocation disrupts physical ties to place and psychological and emotional connections, leading to a fragmented sense of self and belonging that complicates personal and national identities.

Rather than embracing the cosmopolitanism prevalent in the works of Salman Rushdie or Arundhati Roy, Tabish Khair emphasises a form of non-metropolitan and new provincialism rooted in smaller towns such as Gaya and Patna. In doing so, Khair celebrates the hybrid Indianness that emerges from these far-untouched spaces as he focuses on India's provincial and glocal aspects. Khair's provincialism brings to light the experiences of marginalised, socially and economically backwards communities that are often fated to endure cycles of poverty and misery. His works, thus, foreground a pragmatic and hybrid vision of India that celebrates its unusual, diverse spaces and cultures. Khair's novels highlight the nuanced social evils plaguing Indian society, including religious tensions, border disputes, and widespread poverty. These issues are not confined to distant, rural villages. However, they are deeply rooted in urban slums and major cities such as Mumbai. Khair's works, therefore, critique both rural and urban inequalities while offering a complex portrayal of India's provincial identity, which resists simplistic narratives of decay or exile.

A home functions not only as a physical space but as a source of identity, enabling individuals to navigate and make sense of their place within society. In this context, national identity becomes deeply intertwined

with the concept of home, fostering a sense of belonging that shapes personal and collective identity. This same yearning for belonging is what creates the nostalgia for home, a powerful force that compels Odysseus to choose suffering over immortality in his relentless pursuit of returning home in *The Odyssey*: "Yet, it is true, each day I long for home, long for the sight of home" (1998, 87). The longing for home, thus, transcends physical needs, shaping human experiences across time and cultures. Therefore, understanding the distinction between nostalgia and the desire for a home is critical in examining the nuances of belonging and displacement. Nostalgia is often associated with a sense of past privilege, longing for familiar comforts, and the yearning for a lost time in past. This form of nostalgia is rooted in a desire to reclaim a sense of wholeness that has been rendered unreachable, an emotional pursuit that remains inherently unfulfilled. In contrast, the desire for a home shows a more immediate and existential struggle, a fundamental need to secure a place of one's own, free from any external pressure and dependency, establishing a sense of permanence and security where one can live without being subject to another's mercy. A longing for the past does not drive this desire but a pressing need for stability and autonomy in the present.

In *Filming: A Love Story*, Tabish Khair reflects on this disparity, noting that "houses do not make homes" (367) because the concept of home is constantly changing and affected by external forces, including cultural, economic, social, and political factor, based upon specific temporal and spatial contexts within a nation. Khair's novels explore the struggles of impoverished individuals whose desire for a permanent home remains unfulfilled due to the harsh realities of poverty. For them, life is characterised by constant mobility, like migratory birds, moving from place to place, name to name, without having any core identity in search of food and survival, mocking India's national identity that applies to the people who can afford a permanent home. A permanent home remains an illusion, a distant dream for these individuals, complicating their relationship with

society and national identity, as they exist in a different kind of in-between space, where their identity is fluid and continuously shifting what Homi Bhabha refers to as a "third space." Without the rootedness that a home provides, their identities become fragmented, changing with each new location, leaving them without a stable sense of self or belonging. This perpetual displacement highlights the exclusionary nature of India's national identity, which is often only accessible to those with the economic means to secure a permanent home.

While the international diaspora is often characterised by voluntary mobility, intra-national migration in India reveals a different form of displacement. Here, mobility is primarily driven by poverty and hunger, forcing individuals to move for survival, highlighting the divergent experiences of mobility within the "third space," as theorised by Homi Bhabha and explored in Tabish Khair's works. In the international context, movement is a matter of choice, whereas, in the intra-national context, it is an imposed necessity. Khair's depiction of this forced mobility reflects a critique of the socio-economic conditions that marginalise the poor and uproot them from any stable sense of home, drawing attention to the unequal experiences of belonging within different forms of displacement.

Earlier scholarship on home and belongingness emphasises the fluidity of boundaries and the porous nature of borders, highlighting the intricate interplay between the 'interior' and 'exterior' (Campbell 2020, 8). This perspective foregrounds the increasing importance of human mobility in shaping experiences of home. Feminist geographers Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling further assert that "[H]ome is a process of creating and understanding forms of dwelling and belonging," a process that encompasses both material and imaginative elements (Campbell, 7). This view suggests the ever-changing nature of home in the context of international diasporas and within intra-national mobility in India, where constant movement has become a way of life for many.

Some scholars have argued that stability may be antithetical to human nature. Justine Lloyd and Ellie Vasta, in *Reimagining Home*, assert that "[w]e are constantly making homes rather than being at home" (Campbell, 8), highlighting the ongoing process of homemaking as individuals continuously extend their physical locations and aspirations for a better home. Salman Rushdie echoes this sentiment, remarking that "trees have roots, human beings have legs," suggesting the inherent mobility of human existence. Margaret Morse reinforces this notion by contending that "[h]ome often becomes a composite of shifting locations" (Bida 2017, 43), emphasising that home is rarely a singular, fixed space but rather an amalgamation of transient experiences. In *You Can't Go Home Again*, Thomas Wolfe's protagonist articulates the impossibility of returning to an idealized past, declaring, "You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, . . . back home to the escapes of Time and Memory" (Matt 2007, 469) underscoring the fleeting nature of home and the dislocation that often accompanies modern life. In the postcolonial context of India, Pramod K. Nayar argues that the nation's colonial history, coupled with ongoing struggles for social justice, has contributed to the creation of refugees from marginalised communities such as Dalits, minorities, and women (Nayar 2010, 88). As J.P. Singh (1980) notes, internal migration is set to increase with the diversification of economic activities and the expansion of industrialisation, commercialisation, and urbanisation (Gosal 1961, 121), making migration a means of survival for many poor people in India.

In traditional belief systems, the concept of home is closely linked to notions of respectability, encompassing the ideals of marriage, family, and children. It also represents identity and a sense of security within societal and national contexts. As Masgrau-Peya and Masgrau-Peya (2004) explain, "[T]he primary meaning of home is that of a dwelling place or abode, usually with positive connotations of safety, warmth, and belonging" (62). The meaning of home transforms through time; it becomes a

connecting thread for people because of the shared memories assemblage of sounds, sights, tastes, and smells. Ghosh brings out the confusion of home and identity crisis in *The Shadow Lines*, where Jethamoshai says,

> Once you start moving you never stop. […] I don't believe in India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there, they decide to draw another line somewhere? (1988, 157).

However, the notion of home transcends to a singular geographical location. Allen (2008) observes that "[T]he term home can be used to describe many types of environments in multiple geographic locations and scales but does not discriminate or distinguish between them" (85). This broader understanding implies that home is a fluid concept, extending beyond physical spaces to encompass personal identity, the nation, and even the universe. For individuals in varied circumstances, the definition of home has different meanings— a detention camp may function as a home for a refugee, a hostel room for a student, and, ultimately, even a grave can be conceived as a home for the dead body. This view is, however, culturally specific; for instance, in Hinduism, cremation is the preferred practice, and the body does not reside in a grave. Thus, the concept of home, while traditionally associated with security and stability, adapts fluidly to diverse sociocultural and geographical contexts. Given the abstract notion of a home, it is challenging to attach a specific traditional idea to it. Home consists of basic needs, interests, emotions, and passions that create existential comfort.

The yearning for home is particularly resonant among impoverished and migrant populations, who often lack a permanent home of their own. For these individuals, the desire for home is intensified by their circumstances, as many people belong to families that have experienced displacement and instability, resulting in a keen absence of rootedness. As

Masgrau-Peya and Masgau-Peya (2004) note, “Heidegger argues that it is only by being positioned outside of home that the home and the structures on which it relies can be perceived” (60). This perspective highlights that the experience of displacement can illuminate the significance of home and its foundational structures. However, displacement is seldom voluntary for low-income families in India; instead, it is frequently a response to natural disasters or manufactured crises. The narrator in Tabish Khair’s *The Bus Stopped* pitifully expresses this sentiment, “[I] come from a place where choices are less free than they seem to be in other places” (2004, 199), underscoring the limited agency of marginalised communities in navigating their circumstances, illustrating how their mobility is often dictated by necessity rather than choice.

Khair’s philosophical perspective on home emphasises its inherently temporary nature, a reality that relates to many impoverished people's experiences in India. Just as dreams are characterised by instability, so is the notion of home, which becomes an illusion for those who continuously navigate the complexities of displacement. Allen (2008) expresses this phenomenon, noting that “[i]ndividuals are often engaged in the simultaneous process of losing a past home and creating a new one” (85), indicating the transitory nature of home, as individuals cannot simply return to the former sense of belonging; doing so necessitates consideration of both temporal and spatial relationships. Through a postcolonial lens, Salman Rushdie famously contends that “one can never properly return home: that is, to the point from which one set out” (Maxey 2012, 81). This sentiment reflects the challenges of reconciling past affiliations with present realities, as any attempt to reconnect with a former home is thwarted by the passage of time and changing circumstances. The narrator in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* further elucidates this idea, stating that “[a] place does not merely exist; it has to be invented in one’s imagination” (17). The complexities of non-belongingness are similarly articulated in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2007), where the character Ahmed asserts, “[i]t is

impossible to return to a place that was lived as home, precisely because the home is not exterior to a self, but implicated in it" (Maxey, 81). This statement underscores the intimate connection between identity and home, highlighting that the experience of displacement fundamentally alters one's relationship with space and self, illustrating the intricate interplay between belonging, identity, and the notion of home in contemporary Indian society.

How people live in a country is important to a modern nation and its nationalism, where home is no longer understood as a stable geographical location but is viewed as an active space shaped by the movement of individuals across borders. When individuals move between multiple spatial, cultural, and political spaces, home boundaries are redrawn, often resulting in fragmented or hybrid identities, complicating the idea of belonging. This chapter argues that home is also an illusion, not a permanent place that constantly changes like a dream and never gets concretized. The notion of home is multifaceted, as explored by different writers. For instance, for Jane Austen, home is a marker of social status and comfort; for Tagore, home symbolises confinement and domestication of women; for Rushdie, it becomes a sense of nostalgia and loss; for Pinter, it is a space of threat and tension; whereas for Beckett, home is an elusive, uncertain concept, a place that is never fully realised or attainable. These interpretations of home reflect each writer's personal and historical contexts and challenge the traditional understanding of home as a stable and secure place.

5.2 Bhabha versus Khair's Take on Home and Nationality

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha emphasises the complexities of modern internationalism, which he argues is shaped by the histories of postcolonial migration, cultural and political diasporas, and the displacement of marginalised communities, such as peasants and indigenous peoples. He further highlights the poetics of exile and the stark realities faced by political and economic refugees (Bhabha 1994, 7). Bhabha

explores how private and public spheres, past and present, and the psyche and the social intersect through "interstitial intimacy." This intimacy challenges the binary oppositions that traditionally separate these spheres, instead linking them through an "in-between" temporality that redefines the experience of dwelling at home (Bhabha,19). In the introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha explores the concept of home and national identity through the notion of the "unhomely." He reflects on the unsettling experience of displacement, where home becomes a space of dislocation and ambiguity. Bhabha contextualises this idea by engaging with literary figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, Toni Morrison, Nadine Gordimer, and Henry James in his discussion of "Unhomely Lives: The Literature of Recognition." Through these works, he explores the intricate relationships between home, nationality, and belonging. He introduces the notion of "unhomely homes," suggesting that the concept of home is not always synonymous with comfort and stability. In a subsequent interview, *Diaspora and Home: An Interview with Homi K. Bhabha* (2015), Bhabha elaborates on the dual dimensions of "home," distinguishing between moments of temporality and narrative. He posits that "[e]mergence and return are complicit with the concept of home" (2015), indicating that the essence of home is deeply intertwined with experiences of movement and the narratives constructed around it.

The first dimension Bhabha describes reflects a sense of certainty and permanence associated with home, encapsulated in the idea that "it is always there," while the second aspect emphasises the notion of return, akin to a "Conradian idea," which acknowledges the temporal and often elusive nature of belonging. Bhabha posits that individuals in migration follow a particular narrative pattern shaped by displacement movements. He argues that people simultaneously experience loss and gain in such displacements, crafting a narrative that emerges from these transitions. Central to Bhabha's argument is that people on the move have agency and exercise choice and judgment when deciding to migrate. He critiques generalised terms like

"cosmopolitanism" or "nomadism" for obscuring the deliberate nature of migration, emphasising that individuals migrate for specific, carefully considered reasons (Bhabha, 2015). Bhabha reflects on his own experience, noting how his sense of home has evolved across different locations such as Bombay, the United States, and London, each representing a shifting space of belonging shaped by personal decisions. Bhabha asserts that individuals engaged in migration often navigate their experiences of home through a recurring narrative pattern, arguing that "[w]hat is being iterated or articulated around the concept of home are certain needs, certain interests, certain passions and affects, which actually then create that life-world, that existential comfort that you associate with home" (2015).

This perspective highlights the potential for migration to create a sense of belonging and existential comfort by creating new narratives. However, it is important to recognise that this optimistic view of migration does not necessarily apply to the experiences of impoverished migrants in India without having a permanent home. For these people, the notion of home is often characterised by instability and displacement, devoid of the narrative richness that Bhabha associates with migration. Rather than cultivating a sense of belonging, their experiences are frequently marked by economic hardship and a persistent struggle for survival, complicating their relationship with home and national identity. Thus, while Bhabha's insights illuminate the complexities of home in the context of migration, they also underscore the need to critically engage with the realities faced by marginalised populations who face different aspects of belonging and identity. Tabish Khair's conception of home is characterised by instability, illusion, and uncertainty, as the narrator questions: "Where do homes begin? Do they begin out in the street, at the gate, village, city, or country?" (2004, 198). This questioning invites contemplation on the multifaceted nature of home, suggesting that it is not confined to a singular location or definition. The narrator further interrogates the essence of home by asking, "Is home a brother, a sister, a mother, father, husband, or child; is home friends? Is

home where you arrive or what you leave?" (198). Or can a bus or bioscope be home? Such inquiries compel readers to consider that the home can embody many meanings, functioning as everything or nothing.

Throughout his selected novels, Khair delves into the complexities surrounding home, belongingness, and national identity. The tension between temporal and spatial consciousness emerges as a central theme, as Khair refrains from offering didactic lessons, instead illuminating his points through lived experiences. Khair's background, particularly his origins in Gaya and his early education at local colleges gives him a nuanced understanding of the entangled social, political, cultural, and psychological aspects that shape the lives of marginalised individuals, the 'Other' and the subaltern. This trajectory enables Khair to criticise the societal structures that often envelop and constrain these populations, providing a voice to those who remain unheard. Through his narrative strategies, Khair challenges conventional notions of home and belonging, highlighting the deeper existential questions that arise from the experiences of displacement and identity crisis in contemporary India.

Homi K. Bhabha asserts that individuals engaged in migration possess agency, allowing them to make choices regarding their freedom of movement; he describes this as "part of a process of choice and judgment" (2015). He further suggests that once individuals have constructed a narrative around their experiences, they can navigate their return home and significant places or "nodal points" (2015). However, this easy structure is inapplicable primarily to economically disadvantaged populations who lack stable, permanent homes. For these individuals, the necessity of relocating is not a matter of choice or leisurely exploration but rather a compulsion driven by the immediate need to secure employment and basic survival. Their mobility is mainly reactive, dictated by the availability of job opportunities, thus transforming their living arrangements into temporary solutions rather than homes in the conventional sense. This distinction

underlines a critical gap in Bhabha's conceptualisation of migration, as the experience of low-income people reveals that their notion of home is gravely shaped by socio-economic constraints, where the freedom to choose one's movements is frequently an unattainable luxury.

Khair's conceptualisation of home is physical and metaphorical, intertwining the tangible aspects of dwelling with the intangible realms of dreams and aspirations. He articulates this duality when the narrator states that a house is "built not only with materials but also with dreams, hopes, and eccentricities" (2004, 3). This distinction is further elaborated through the assertion that "[h]ouses are built of brick but homes are made of breath" (3), emphasising the difference between mere shelter, where individuals survive, and a home, which signifies a space where people find comfort and happiness. For marginalised and migratory populations, the concept of home becomes even more complex due to the lack of permanent space; they often inhabit temporary or rented accommodations, where their existence revolves primarily around survival rather than belonging. Traditionally, homes are expected to provide a fixed point of return, a permanent place of belonging; however, Khair challenges this notion by illustrating how his characters' identities and the home itself are mobile and nomadic. As Mahmutovic (2013) observes, "the home itself is nomadic" (83) in Khair's novels. The narrator aptly expresses this fluidity as he says, "I have found and lost, lost and found my houses too. I make my home on buses and aeroplanes, in hotels and rented apartments" (2004, 198), emphasising the impermanence of home in the lives of those constantly in move, navigating a world where the idea of home is not fixed.

However, intra-national communities in India, comprised of migrants and mobile populations, significantly shape national development. As contributors to the construction of national identity, the conditions of these migrant groups must be re-examined beyond the conventional minority perspective. Bhabha highlights the importance of this shift,

arguing that the experiences of disenfranchised minorities are increasingly central to the production of national cultures, asserting that "[i]ncreasingly, 'national' cultures are being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities" (1994, 8). This movement suggests that dominant groups do not solely shape the national identity. In the contemporary era of global and transnational citizenship, the discourse surrounding permanence regarding home or nation has gained more significance as an understanding of belonging continues to evolve. The inevitability of mobility, both geographically and temporally, shapes individuals' life trajectories, creating a duality where home represents both stability and tension. Homi Bhabha challenges the traditional emphasis on permanence, suggesting that impermanence may offer a more insightful way to understand belongingness in this globalised world by arguing that the transient experience of the refugee, rather than notions of permanence, may be more relevant to rethinking how individuals engage with the world (Bhabha, 2015). Bhabha posits that the impermanence associated with refugee status could provide a critical framework for understanding contemporary modes of belonging, challenging static definitions tied to fixed locations or identities (2015).

In human life, geographical and temporal mobility certainty shapes individual experiences. Bhabha argues, "I'm beginning to think that maybe the most important way we can rethink how we belong in the world is to take, ironically, the short temporal span of the refugee" (2015). He further suggests that "maybe it's not the permanence, but the impermanence of the status of the refugee that will be most helpful to us" (2015). Here, Bhabha conceptualises migration and mobility as avenues for development and self-discovery. However, it is crucial to recognise that Bhabha's insights predominantly pertain to international migration and the experiences of individuals traversing international borders. Such frameworks do not adequately encompass the realities faced by impoverished migrants in India, whose primary concern revolves around survival rather than the

opportunities that mobility might offer. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha explores the concept of "beyond" as a spatial and temporal distance marker, emphasising how individuals living outside their original locations experience disjunction and displacement, emphasising that the act of moving beyond is inherently unknowable and unrepresentable without a return to the present, which, through repetition, becomes fragmented and dislocated (Bhabha 1994, 6). This notion resounds with the fictional characters in Khair's novels, who similarly face the instability of migratory existence, where location is never a fixed or stable entity.

In the context of globalisation, Bhabha contends that the idea of homogenous national cultures is undergoing a profound redefinition, contributing to this "new" internationalism. He characterises this transition as "the middle passage of contemporary culture," a process defined by displacement and disjunction that resists the totalization of experience (1994, 8). Bhabha further argues that migration plays a critical role in shaping the development of modern nations. He describes the "new internationalism" as rooted in the history of postcolonial migration, marked by the displacements of peasants, aboriginal communities, exiles, and refugees, both political and economic (1994, 6). Therefore, migration is acknowledged as a critical mechanism for development. However, in countries such as India and other developing nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, it has contributed to significant imbalances in the distribution of population and resources (Singh 1980, 48). The large-scale internal migration within India highly impacts the nation; as Bhabha observes, "The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor" (1994, 200). This metaphor signifies the complex notions of home and belonging in a country where geographical distances and cultural differences fragment the idea of a unified community, symbolising a shared identity constructed across diverse and often disconnected populations.

Khair's novels vividly illustrate the tumultuous experiences of these migrants, who experience profound identity crises rooted in nationalism and belonging as they lack a permanent home. In contemporary India, numerous poor individuals are compelled to move from one place to another, often undergoing shifts in temporal and spatial contexts, engendering and disorienting their experiences that disrupt their sense of self and belonging, underscoring the complexities of their existence within the broader narrative of Indian national identity. Thus, while mobility may offer theoretical advantages in specific contexts, for many in India, it becomes a source of instability and alienation, challenging traditional notions of home and identity. Tabish Khair conceptualises human imagination and dreams as boundless, contrasting with the limited nature of home, which he describes as possessing "shuttered windows like eyes closed to the world outside" (2004, 39).

In *Nation and Narration*, Homi K. Bhabha argues that "[t]he nation is no longer the sign of modernity under which cultural differences are homogenised in the 'horizontal' view of society" (1994, 214), pointing out the significance of displacement in fostering the development of a nation. However, mass migration within a country complicates the situation for migratory populations, adversely impacting the trajectory of modern nation-building. As Bhabha notes, "the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (1994, 13). For individuals experiencing poverty, nationality alone does not constitute a coherent national identity, as identity is fundamentally a subjective experience. In India, a substantial proportion of rural, regional, and subaltern communities grapple with poverty and strive for survival through various means. Their social and economic conditions are often precarious, particularly regarding their sense of belonging and identity. This struggle is not limited to rural areas; it extends to urban ghettos, where individuals face similar challenges.

India, as a democratic country, promises the right to equality to all its citizens. Bhabha articulates the concept of the "right to difference in equality" of migrants and diasporic minorities in the preface to *The Location of Culture*, advocating for their entitlement to equality and the freedom to live and express themselves within a nation. However, Bhabha's idea of migration primarily addresses international contexts where issues of racial and gender equality are more pronounced. In contrast, intra-national migration within India presents a more intricate challenge to equality. Poor Indian migrants often encounter multifaceted inequalities that transcend mere race and ethnicity; they grapple with cultural (caste), linguistic, and religious disparities that exacerbate their marginalisation. Consequently, these poor migrants in India lack this right to difference in equality and freedom to live in a permanent home as the nation does not provide them with economic, political, legal, and social assistance. Consequently, such people compel themselves to migrate from one place to another in search of jobs, making temporary homes inevitable to survive. So, a friendly temporal and spatial atmosphere in a country like India is essential and urgent

5.3 Exploration of Home and Belongingness in Khair's Novels

Poverty, a fundamental cause of the struggle for survival, emerges as a critical issue in many Indian societies. This theme is passionately explored in Tabish Khair's novels *The Bus Stopped* and *Filming: A Love Story*, which analyses the multifaceted dimensions of human mobility and belongingness within varying temporal and spatial consciousness. Many individuals in India inhabit a different kind of third space, characterised by the absence of a stable home and often lack the financial means to secure rental accommodations. This precarious existence compels them to engage in continual migration, traversing diverse locales in search of job opportunities for survival. Khair's other novel, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012), also highlights the situation of migration and mobility, emphasising the importance of national identity and belongingness to home. The notion of home is multifaceted, with each

writer offering a distinct interpretation shaped by social, cultural, and existential concerns where home reflects each writer's personal and historical contexts and challenges the traditional understanding of home as a stable and secure place.

In *Filming: A Love Story*, Khair's narratives illuminate the experiences of characters such as Harihar and Durga, along with other labourers from Bihar, who navigate a transient existence marked by a lack of permanent shelter. These individuals endure numerous challenges as they traverse various locations, illustrating the harsh realities of their journeys and the instability of their living conditions. Life without a permanent home presents significant challenges, particularly for individuals unable to secure stable housing, necessitating their continuous relocation from one temporary shelter to another. For these impoverished migrant populations in India, existence often resembles a perpetual state of exile. Although exile within one's own country may appear appealing, the lived reality is fraught with hardship, characterised by numerous adversities. These people constantly grapple with the dual burdens of hunger and the yearning for a sense of belonging. In this context, migration is not a voluntary choice but a compulsion driven by poverty and the scarcity of employment opportunities in their localities. The imperative of survival and the uncontrollable hunger conquer and compel them to move because "[S]easonal labour migration is an essential part of the lives and livelihoods of the poorest sections of rural India and its significance is growing (Mosse et al., 2005)" (Keshri, Kunal and Bhagat, Ram B. 2010, 27).

In *The Bus Stopped*, Khair vividly portrays the plight of these marginalised groups, depicting the exodus of petty farmers and landless labourers from rural areas searching for employment in cities like Gaya or Patna. Khair shows-

> The petty farmers and the landless labourers leave the mufassil in search of jobs in Gaya, Phansa […] A crush of ill-clothed men, much darker than me, stinking of sweat and dung-fire, clutching belongings wrapped in dirty gamchhas or old saris (2004, 118).

Through this portrayal, Khair highlights the sad realities of such people, pointing out the intersection of poverty, migration, and the ongoing struggle for dignity and belonging in a challenging socio-economic landscape. *Filming* based on Saadat Hasan Manto's memory critically maps the socio-political aspects of pre-and post-partition India, mainly focusing on themes of mobility, displacement, and migration against the backdrop of emerging cinema and the barbed wire (partition). The novel opens with a striking image of a six-year-old boy chasing after a bullock cart in which his sick father is resting and his mother is giving directions to the cart, highlighting the illusory nature of home for the impoverished: "[t]he boy's bare legs were almost white with dust up to the knees" (2007, 8), as he seeks new shelter (home).

They have to constantly travel physically to earn money, but their mobility is both physical and psychological as they are always lost in their dreams of home and more money to make a home as Durga's "[e]yeballs are ricocheting from dream to dream" (33). Whenever they move to a new city or village, they always make a temporary tent or rent a little room to show their shows after begging and getting permission from the landlords for a few days. Therefore, their very travelling becomes home for them as Harihar says, "[I] could get a cart and a new film, and travel right across the Presidency … showing films all the way" (17), illustrating the tension between their realities and longing for a secure existence within the framework of migration and displacement.

In *Filming*, Khair articulates a philosophical perspective underscoring the inherent non-belongingness of home, asserting that actual settlement is psychologically unattainable for individuals confined to a transient existence. This assertion emerges as a tragic reality for

impoverished characters such as Harihar and Durga, who can only have dreams of home while confronting the stark absence of such a place in their real life. People's identities and belongingness change with the shifting of new locations. In the journey of shifting locations, changing houses and getting rich from poor, Durga changes her identity "[f]rom Durga, wife of Harihar the Bioscopewallah, to Bhuvneshwari, wife of Director Hari Babu, so many shifting roles and relationships- Ma, Didi, Mausi, Bhabhi…" (238). Farhana, a Muslim transgender person, changes her identity by shifting her location from Farhana to Parvati, a Hindu when she somehow manages to marry the son of wealthy Mrs. Mirchandani. Like identities, houses change too, Farhana opines, "The old gharanas rotted and disappeared. Some turned into insulated and closed worlds, others became dens of prostitution and petty extortion. The gharana of my ustad simply fell apart after her death" (17).

As portrayed in the narrative, social relations are expanding, and so is 'home' because it is subject to external forces like cultural, social, political, etc., based on specific times and locations in a nation. Home, therefore, has social and political aspects that provide identical and national affiliation that comes with some privileges because home also seems to become a private space for a person's worldly journey. To get this privilege, Durga wants a home, and she dreams about it, "[s]he wanted a house, a family, home; she wanted to be settled" (41). Durga's longing encapsulates the broader socio-political implications of home, as it serves not only as a private space but also as a critical component of one's worldly journey. The quest for a home reflects the universal human desire for belonging and stability. Nevertheless, for those like Durga, entangled in migration and economic hardship cycles, such aspirations remain elusive, illuminating the complex interplay between identity, belonging, and socio-political structures in contemporary India. Durga's deep desire for a permanent home shows her suffering to plant a root for her son, Ashok, revealing a deep-seated belief that identity is intricately tied to the notion of home. Her

longing for a permanent residence symbolises a broader existential need, as she perceives home as the foundation of identity that bestows individuals with a national affiliation and social stability.

Durga's aspirations are compounded by her awareness of the alienation and estrangement through her migrant experience. The lack of a permanent home perpetuates a feeling of incompleteness, as the absence of a stable identity leaves her vulnerable to the dislocations of her transient lifestyle. This desire for a home reflects a universal human longing for attachment, safety, and peace, often validated through a home's possession. Durga envisions securing a home will enable her family to resist the inevitable passage of time and the pressures of societal expectations. However, economic hardship persistently thwarts this aspiration, as the couple struggles to earn enough money from their shows, sometimes as low as three annas per show or compensated with essential goods such as wheat or rice, highlighting the precariousness of their existence (14). With every new dis(location), Harihar hardly gets enough money to survive and constantly struggles for money. So, for him, travelling itself has become his passion and a source of life for survival. He had 'guarded this passion like an infant' (17). This paradox highlights the complexity of migration, as the very means of survival and the pursuit of dreams perpetuate their sense of liminality.

Durga's constant dream of a house encapsulates a more profound yearning for stability and belonging. However, Harihar says, "[y]ou will get your house after this tour… but they never got" (48), highlighting the disillusionment that saturates their transient life. In the context of their ceaseless mobility, the distinction between home and journey blurs as their experiences in in between become more significant, as noted by Dovey, "If home is the thesis and journey its antithesis, then the synthesis is a deepened experience of the phenomenon of home" (Allen, 86). This unification stresses the complexity of the migrant experience, where the notion of home transcends physical space and is redefined through the lens of movement

and impermanence. This concept resonates with Samuel Beckett's understanding of home and its inherent uncertainties in his seminal tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot* (1953), wherein the condition of two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, embodies and reflects the profound dislocation and existential uncertainty of twentieth-century life, where the stability of the home, both physical and metaphysical, is absent. Their endless waiting for Godot— a figure of their last hope, salvation, or a sense of belonging— illustrates the futility and uncertainty inherent in their lives. The characters' condition reflects a broader existential dilemma: the quest for home becomes an act of waiting for something that may never arrive, transforming their experience of anticipation into a form of existence devoid of a definitive place of belonging.

The state of waiting becomes a metaphorical home, underscoring the irony that, in the absence of a stable or permanent residence, the act of longing for home can become the only consistent element in their lives. Estragon's remark, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" encapsulates the stagnation and inertia that define their existence, highlighting the futility of waiting for Godot, who never arrives. This existential incapacity reflects the broader disillusionment of modernity, where home, once considered a space of security and belonging, becomes uncertain and elusive. Thus, both Khair's portrayal of Durga and Harihar and Beckett's depiction of the tramps illustrate the precarious nature of belonging in a world marked by mobility and uncertainty. Therefore, home can be defined not only by physical space but also by deeper emotional and psychological spaces.

In *Filming,* Khair shows the sharp contrast between the lived experiences of the rich and the poor, particularly through the relationship between Durga and her son, Ashok. For Durga, the concept of home remains elusive as a mere 'word' that she weaves into her narratives of aspiration and longing. She reflects on the nature of language, stating, "[w]ords are

like shadows. They change shape. They grow. They lurk" (100), sketching her perception of home as something intangible, forever shifting and unattainable, suggesting her socio-economic reality. However, Ashok's experience embodies a different understanding of home, shaped by his exposure to wealth and comfort after living with the affluent Thakur family. His longing for a tangible home —a Haweli or a hut— contrasts sharply with his mother's transient existence. Despite the privileges he encounters in the household of the Thakur, Ashok's recollection of his childhood home remains fraught with ambivalence. He neither fully remembers it nor can he dissociate entirely from it as he grapples with the weight of his mother's aspirations: "[y]et he could not forget it either, for his mother was possessed by the desire for one" (100). Khair thus critiques the socio-economic divides in contemporary Indian society, revealing how the notion of home is influenced by class and privilege.

Home represents a distant dream laden with unfulfilled desires for the poor, while for the wealthy, it signifies a material reality replete with comforts. This disparity highlights the broader implications of poverty and privilege, illustrating how home serves as a contested space shaped by social stratification. Khair's narrative also compels readers to reflect on the intricate interplay between economic status, identity, and the human need for a place to belong, emphasising the realities marginalised individuals face in their quest for a sense of home. By employing the metaphor of the "Bahuroopiya,[10]" a traditional Indian performer who adopts various personas, Khair displays individuals' plight without a permanent home. This concept serves to highlight the fluidity of identity among those who are marginalised and displaced. Ashok's reflections on the "Bahuroopiya" resonate with his understanding of his father's existence as a wanderer, devoid of a fixed home, suggesting the inherent instability faced by those

[10] Bahuroopiya (actor, mimic) is someone who takes many forms or impersonations.

who traverse various social and geographical landscapes, unable to establish a consistent sense of self.

The interaction of Ashok with the Nautanki Wala[11] further emphasizes this theme of transient identity when he inquiries about his residence by stating, "I live wherever there are children like you; I go from village to village for the pleasure of good little boys like you" (119). The answer reveals a disconnection from any fixed notion of home and identity, reinforcing Ashok's suspicion and crystallising his understanding that those who embody multiple identities are fundamentally alienated from the home. Ashok muses, "People who have too many faces and too many voices do not have a home" (119), exemplifying a profound understanding of the psychological impact of dislocation where Khair's exploration of the "Bahuroopiya" metaphorically illustrates the broader socio-cultural implications of displacement in contemporary India. It criticises the societal structures that make people invisible and voiceless, pointing out that a lack of a permanent home means the disintegration of identity. Khair movingly depicts this situation through the tragic sacrifices made by Harihar and Durga in their pursuit of stability and belonging within a socio-economic landscape.

Harihar's decision to sell his only son to the wealthy, childless Thakur family epitomises the desperation driven by his impossible dream of making or having a home through the medium of bioscope shows. This abandonment act reveals a profound disillusionment, where the desire for a better life undermines the blood bond between parent and child. Durga's agreement to abandon her only son reflects a similar hope for his future. She believes that at least her son might get a permanent home to live with the wealthy Thakur family. However, the underlying tension remains palpable despite Ashok's newfound environment, as the narrator points out, "[h]e did

[11] Nautanki means drama and someone who perform or act in a drama is called Nautanki Wala.

not belong there. Surely, he could not" (133), underscoring the precarious nature of belonging, suggesting that even when individuals find a home to associate with stability and wealth, their sense of identity remains incomplete with uncertainty. It suggests that in India's larger existential crisis and socioeconomic hierarchies, low-income people are always alienated from home and national identity. This gap is further complicated by the realisation that belonging is not solely determined by physical space but is intricately connected to identity, social connections, and cultural narratives. Through Durga's introspective acceptance that it took her "almost a lifetime to realise that her sacrifice in Anjangarh was unnecessary: houses do not make home" (367), the novel critiques the social misconceptions about home ownership and belonging. The narrative ultimately emphasises the illusory nature of home for many marginalised individuals in India, pointing out that despite residing in a physical house, true belonging remains an unfulfilled desire, reinforcing the poor to seek a sense of home throughout their lives. This sentiment resonates with the observation that people are often "too much in an imaginary home, located in the past and future rather than the present" (Maxey, 82).

The Bus Stopped critically examines the themes of metropolitanism and cosmopolitanism within the socio-economic context of Bihar, India, as it narrates a bus journey from Gaya to the fictional city of Phansa. This journey serves as a narrative device to explore concepts of home, mobility, and the inherent non-belongingness that characterises the lives of marginalised individuals. The narrator reflects on this complex relationship with home, stating, "[t]here are times when I feel that this is the only home I have ever known, will ever know. No matter where I go, […] this will be home" (2004, 4). However, this sentiment is suddenly broken by the realisation that "[h]ouses are built of brick but homes are made of breath" (3), underscoring the emotional and psychological elements of belonging. In this novel, Khair foregrounds the experiences of individuals who cannot have a permanent home and are compelled to leave their familial spaces in

search of jobs. They encompass a diverse array of characters, including servants, maidservants, impoverished peasants, and abandoned children, whose meagre earnings often contribute to the survival of their families. The novel highlights these people's precarious living conditions; who mostly live in servants' quarters, one-night stands, on pavements, railway platforms, bus stands, or in the vicinity of shops.

The narrator's inquiry, "[d]on't they have their houses of their own?" followed by the reply, "[s]ome did and many didn't" (7), reveals the complex realities faced by the poor. While these individuals often dream of a permanent home to live with their families, the harsh realities of economic necessity force them to relocate in search of employment opportunities continually. This endless state of transience not only impacts their physical living but also complicates their existential struggles, illustrating their extreme disconnection between the real home and the lived experience of homelessness. Through this exploration, the chapter critiques the socio-economic structures that render stable housing an unattainable dream for many in contemporary Indian society, highlighting the broader implications of migration and mobility. The inability of individuals to even see a dream underlines the harsh realities faced by the impoverished, haunted by the dream of home. Poverty is a very shameful condition in situations where it does not care about the innocence of childhood. This situation is sharply illustrated through the character of Rameshwar, a cleaning boy who sleeps daily on a wooden bench outside the tea and samosa stalls, "[p]recariously balanced completely wrapped in a patched Kambal[12]" (20). People recognise the child as another comment, "[i]t is Rameshwar because that is where the boy sleeps every night" (20), normalising the pitiable existence of such poverty.

[12] Kambal is a Hindi word for blanket.

Pramod K. Nayar argues that in postcolonial societies like India, the pursuit of development often results in the creation of vast numbers of dispossessed and displaced individuals (2010, 88). This notion echoes Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), which similarly addresses the plight of those in a state of dislocation, striving for a sense of home while offering a humanist critique of dispossession in the postcolonial context. Arundhati Roy also highlights this sentiment, stating that "[t]he millions of displaced in India are nothing but refugees in an unacknowledged war" (2001, 65) (Nayar 2010, 88). In this light, the experiences of the poor people in constant migration, without having a permanent home, reveal how they become the victims of systemic violence despite committing any crime. Such people have to fight daily for two-time meals and a safe space to sleep, illustrating the profound injustices embedded within the socioeconomic systems of India. This representation not only critiques the broader socio-economic structures that perpetuate poverty and homelessness but also calls attention to the urgent need for social recognition and justification for the fundamental rights of marginalised people.

Khair's novel sharply explores the plight of poor labourers from various states in India, who find themselves trapped in a cycle of systemic violence posed by socio-economic inequalities. It vividly portrays the awful circumstances faced by impoverished farmers and labourers residing in rural regions, particularly in Bihar. These people engage in seasonal migration, akin to the migratory birds, seeking employment opportunities in urban centres during agricultural decline. The novel emphasises that, during the summer months, when crops are poor, "[p]etty farmers and the landless labourers leave the mufassil in search of jobs" (118), highlighting the precariousness condition of such people.

Without stable jobs, these labourers force themselves to undertake menial tasks in the cities, hoping to earn some money to support their families in remote villages. This relentless struggle for survival leads to

their accommodation in urban spaces that lack basic amenities, as observed by the narrator: "[o]n summer nights, the railway platforms and bus shelters of Phansa are full of those bundled figures" (118). For many, the inability to return home due to insufficient savings compels them to continue working in the cities, comforting themselves in the hope that one day they will save enough to reunite with their families. The connection to their families remains a vital aspect of their identity, illustrated by the notion that "[d]istances are relatives" (122) within the national context. However, this persistent longing is complicated by their experiences of dislocation and the challenges of forging a coherent national identity as they continually shift between locations, facing an identity crisis from their lack of a permanent home.

Several scholars highlight that "[s]easonal labor migration is an essential part of the lives and livelihoods of the poorest sections of rural India, and its significance is growing (Mosse et al., 2005)" (Keshri and Bhagat 2010, 25). In many Indian villages, people survive through agriculture and farming because of limited options for sustainable income. However, most of the rural population do not have their own land for cultivation, compelling them to move outside the village. For such people, this temporary migration for menial jobs becomes a primary strategy for survival. This phenomenon highlights how the necessity of mobility and transience in the lives of these individuals shapes their lives and identities. As noted by various scholars, temporary migration has emerged as a vital livelihood strategy among the poorest segments of rural India, predominantly through seasonal labour mobility—

> Temporary migration is one of the most significant livelihood strategies adopted among the poorest section in rural India, predominantly in the form of seasonal mobility of labor (Breman, 1978; Breman, 1996; Deshingkar and Farrington, 2009a; Deshingkar and Start, 2003; Haberfeld et al., 1999; Mosse et al.,

2005; Rao and Rana, 1997; Rogaly, 1998; Rogaly et al., 2001) (Keshri and B. Bhagat, 25).

The reliance on temporary migration reflects the broader socio-economic dynamics at play in rural India, where limited access to resources and opportunities compels individuals to seek employment outside their localities. This systemic reliance on mobility for survival highlights the intersection of poverty, landlessness, and forced labour in affecting the lived experiences of marginalised communities in India, fundamentally altering the fabric of social relations among rural populations.

In *The Bus Stopped*, the bus serves as a metaphor for life and mobility, highlighting the experiences of displacement and journey that characterise the characters' lives. This narrative shows that mobility, although a means of opportunity and progress, is intricately linked to struggles and hardships, illustrating that these characters are compelled to undertake journeys not by choice but by necessity. Characters in the novel traverse various landscapes, navigating the harsh realities of survival in a socio-economic framework that frequently marginalises their existence. This forced migration, driven by poverty and lack of access to resources, illuminates the broader themes of alienation and the quest for belonging in an ever-changing world. Through the bus metaphor, the novel points out the dual nature of travel: movement and the inherent suffering accompanying it. The characters' journeys, shaped by external forces, reflect a scathing commentary on the human condition; as the narrator in *The Bus Stopped* argues,

> And in those places, fingers are pointed. Look, say those who believe that they have deep rooted homes, stop, stop, they exclaim as we pass their counters and gardens, look, look, they shout, for after centuries of eradicating the homeless, les marginaux, the landless peasantry, the gypsies, the wandering jew, the bumps, the

> lumpen proletariat, after centuries of planting people like trees, they still have us, and so they raise their fingers and shout, thief murderer stowaway immigrant (198).

Khair shows the illusive nature of life experienced by the impoverished characters as their lives are depicted as a continuous journey, akin to a regular bus, characterised by constant movement from one location to another in search of sustenance and security. The narrative highlights that these individuals stop their journey only when they become incapable of moving, underscoring their life's s relentless and often gruelling nature. The burial of the dead tribal kid provides a profound symbol within this context, where the description of the burial of the child's body illustrates the utter deprivation that defines their lives, "[a] shallow pit was dug, the child's body placed in it and covered up" (168), suggesting that even in death, the poor are denied the dignity of a proper farewell. This moment brings out the ultimate suffering of such people in movement compared with the bus— symbolic of life and mobility— stops only when these individuals can no longer continue their journey.

Mangal Singh, the bus driver in the novel, embodies the theme of mobility as an intrinsic aspect of human existence. His ongoing journey, marked by the collection of "images! Images!" from each trip, underscores the desire for connection and identity between the transitory nature of life. This desire for connection is rooted in a fundamental human need to anchor oneself in a world of constant movement and change. Mangal Singh's assertion, "This place belongs to Driver Mangal Singh," written upon the dashboard of his bus, serves as a declaration of ownership and belonging. Despite the impermanence inherent in his profession, he seeks to establish a semblance of home within the confines of his bus. While continually crossing various landscapes, he endeavours to forge a sense of identity and attachment to the places he visits. The bus becomes a microcosm of broader

social dynamics, illustrating how individuals navigate the complexities of belonging in a rapidly changing environment.

In this context, Khair's portrayal of Mangal Singh highlights the existential quest for home, identity, and belonging that permeates the lives of those who inhabit the margins of society, ultimately reflecting the broader human experience of seeking meaning. The concept of home in the novel as an elusive construct shows that the emotional connections fostered within a space often hold more significance than the physical space itself. Farhana's recollection of her earlier home illustrates this understanding: "It faded from my memory as easily as a photograph fades in the summer sunlight" (52). This sentiment reflects the temporary nature of physical spaces, suggesting that what connects people to the idea of home is not the house itself but its relationships and emotional experiences. Her attachment to her closest friend, Chaand, reinforces this idea; she expresses that "if anything was left, it was the sepia tone of the caresses and gestures that I had shared with Chaand" (52), pointing to the essence of the home which is found in the bonds of affection and companionship rather than in the physical house.

The exploration of home extends to the character of Chottu, a child servant who believes that "[e]ducation is not like for him" (87), revealing an extreme disconnection from the equal opportunities within the nation-state. His statement indicates a broader systemic issue where the promise of education and a stable home remains out of reach for specific strata of society, particularly those in poverty. This disenfranchisement not only illustrates the barriers to accessing the fundamental building blocks of national identity but also critiques the notion of modern nationality, which seemingly encompasses all citizens. Therefore, Khair's narrative challenges the traditional understanding of home and national identity by foregrounding the experiences of those who remain excluded from its promises. Through characters like Farhana and Chottu, the novel articulates

a poignant commentary on the complexities of belonging in a society where socio-economic realities and systemic inequities often overshadow the meaning of home.

At the end of *The Bus Stopped* the narrator articulates the notion that even multiple homes, including his childhood home with his grandmother, fail to provide a sense of permanence or belonging: "My homes—fragile, confusing, monstrous—have not been contained by Ammi ke yahan and Ghar, even though I have always borne their burden" (196). This reflection raises critical questions about the nature of home and belonging. If individuals from privileged relatives also grapple with the elusive nature of home despite possessing a permanent dwelling, how can those in the margins ever experience a home of permanence? For such people, the quest for a permanent home often remains an unattainable dream, intensified by the dual burdens of poverty and identity crisis. Nevertheless, Khair shows a persistent human inclination towards their goal without life struggles. As demonstrated by the bus conductor, who remains fixated on the dream of acquiring his own bus and enhancing his life circumstances, as he states, "I cannot afford to be distracted by the force of life all around me" (175), encapsulates the drive for progress and dream of making a permanent home and stable life.

This ceaseless mobility, however, is often borne out of necessity rather than choice, as the narrator argues, "[h]uman beings are like pieces of cloth in the rain of time: porous" (182), highlighting the transitory and vulnerable nature of human existence. Such individuals are compelled to migrate for sustenance and survival, marking a sharp contrast between their reality and the ideal of home as a stable foundation for identity and belonging. Finally, Khair illustrates the multifaceted nature of home and belonging as characters get off the bus from their journeys back to various destinations, defining the concept of home differently. Upon disembarking from the bus, some people may find themselves in temporary

accommodation, some permanent residences, or precarious living situations such as rented spaces or flimsy tents. The narrator expresses this complexity by stating, “I have the home of my memories” (195), suggesting that the notion of home transcends physical location and is deeply rooted in nostalgia or personal experiences.

However, this nostalgic longing for the past is often fraught with inherent futility as characters realise that the temporal existence of their former homes has irrevocably changed. This sentiment is echoed in Monika Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), where a character points out how he cannot step into the same river twice, emphasising the impossibility of fully reclaiming his past home. Such reflections on the elusiveness of home resonate with the characters’ experiences in other literary works. For instance, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003) examines the immigrant experience, highlighting the tension between the desire for belonging and the reality of cultural dislocation. Similarly, Thomas Wolfe’s *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940) points out that returning to one’s origins often reveals the transformative nature of self and environment, rendering previous identities already gone.

Furthermore, Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) underscores the complexities of belonging in a globalised world, where the search for a home is often intertwined with socio-political upheaval and identity crises. These narratives collectively underscore a profound understanding of home as an ever-evolving construct intricately linked to memory, identity, and the passage of time. Therefore, Khair not only critiques the illusion of home as a static entity but also highlights the existential dilemmas faced by people yearning to reconcile their memories with their present realities.

5.3.1 *Discussion of Third Space in Khair’s Novels*

In his exploration of cultural hybridity and the complexities of identity formation, Homi K. Bhabha introduces the concept of the “third

space," which emphasises the "[i]ntersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value…" (1994, 2). Third space is a sociocultural term used to denote communal space between home and work; Bhabha explains it in terms of the uniqueness of each person, actor and context as culturally hybrid, as there are "…unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation" (2004, 245). This notion challenges the rigid binary divisions traditionally employed in discussions of identity, instead proposing an "'[in]-between' temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home" (1994, 19). Bhabha's framework is particularly pertinent in multicultural societies like India, where the interplay of diverse cultures and languages engenders a complex social fabric that reflects unity and discord. Bhabha's emphasis on intercultural faith and the assimilation of various cultural narratives manifests within what he describes as the liminal aspect of nation space. This liminality produces a "discursive image at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world" (1994, 19), wherein identities are continuously negotiated and redefined.

Bhabha asserts that the "liminal movement" within national culture, which simultaneously fragments and unifies, gives rise to minority discourse (1994, 222). He contends that despite internal divisions, the people-nation can still manifest a form of democratic "anonymity" within the social imaginary, allowing for collective identification (1994, 227). While Bhabha primarily addresses the international borders that shape global interactions, Khair's examination of identity operates within a more localised framework, focusing on intra-national borders between states and villages in India. In Khair's narratives, the boundaries that separate communities are filled with conflict, revealing a more contentious process of identity formation. These intra-national borders are not merely geographical demarcations; they embody the socio-political tensions and cultural divisions that complicate the quest for belonging. The inhabitants of these border regions fight with the duality of gaining new identities while simultaneously losing the old ones, often manifesting in a struggle to assert

their agency within a system that perpetuates marginalisation and dispossession.

The changing nature of identity at these borders reflects Bhabha's notion that identity is never fixed but is instead a fluid construct shaped by historical narratives and cultural interactions. However, while Bhabha envisions a celebratory assimilation of cultures, Khair's portrayal underscores the harsher realities of those caught within these intra-national conflicts. The processes of negotiating identity in the shadow of economic deprivation, cultural displacement, and social injustice illuminate the challenges of achieving a cohesive national identity that genuinely encompasses the diverse experiences of its constituents. Consequently, Khair's work compels readers to reconsider the suggestions of Bhabha's theories in contexts marked by internal strife, highlighting that the borders within a nation can serve as sites of profound contestation rather than mere transitional spaces for identity formation. The dichotomy between the ideal of "unity in diversity" and the lived experiences of individuals navigating these intra-national boundaries reveals the limitations of theoretical frameworks that overlook the intricate socio-cultural realities of marginalised communities in India.

As articulated by Bhabha, the concept of third space is fundamentally sociocultural, serving as a framework for understanding the communal spaces that emerge between home and work. Bhabha foregrounds the experiences of hybridity and the in-between situations encountered by diasporic peoples in the context of migration. He posits that while such individuals often grapple with several challenges, they simultaneously experience a form of liberation through their displacement, which grants them the opportunity to inhabit diverse and multifaceted lives. In contrast, Tabish Khair's novels present a less empowering interpretation of the third space within postcolonial discourse. Rather than celebrating the potential for agency and self-definition that Bhabha suggests, Khair's

narratives illustrate how the illusory dwellings often become a metaphor for the precarious existence of those who lack a permanent home. In this context, the journey, fraught with uncertainty, paradoxically evolves into a semblance of a permanent home for the marginalised characters, who find themselves trapped in a cycle of mobility without stability.

People do not rely on and trust people without a permanent home, as captured by the character of Munshi, who asserts, "[a]ll these boys are thieves: no home, no address, you cannot trust" (103). This sentiment underscores the deep-seated stigma associated with homelessness, as individuals lacking a stable home are frequently viewed with suspicion and are marginalised by local landlords and administrative bodies in their new environments. Children from migrant families, like Ashok, are particularly vulnerable to these societal circumstances, constantly anxious about exclusion and rejection: "[A]shok always fears being shooed away" (101). This state of existence engenders a complex and precarious form of third space that deviates from Bhabha's more optimistic framing. In Khair's narrative, this in-between space is characterised by instability, alienation, and a profound lack of belonging, thereby complicating the notion of identity as fluid and empowering. As Pramod K. Nayar observes, the consequences of postcolonial modernity in India are dire, culminating in "the loss of home and homelands" amid a systemic absence of support for the dispossessed, as "[I]ndia does not have a national rehabilitation policy" (2010, 88). Khair's portrayal of the third space thus invites a critical re-examination of Bhabha's theoretical construct, emphasising the material realities and structural inequalities that shape the lives of marginalised individuals in postcolonial societies.

5.3.2 *Non-belongingness and Deferred Home*

The dynamics of survival in contexts of (dis)location show that people often depend on mental resilience rather than physical endurance, rendering the act of survival increasingly complex. This phenomenon

suggests that mobility is primarily a mental construct rather than a purely physical endeavour, highlighting individuals' difficulties as they navigate their identities and sense of belonging in unfamiliar environments. This idea of "deferred home" explains a continuous postponement of the notion of home, where the possibility of establishing a permanent residence remains perpetually out of reach. The idea of home evokes a sense of regaining the presentness that gets enveloped in our habitual way of looking at the world more than returning home. The novels portray that dreams are greater than a home as dreams make people mobile to fulfil their desires, and in this mobility, a father can leave his son if he cannot catch up. Ruth Maxey articulates this sentiment by stating that "[s]ojourners reside far from home in order to make a home, with the ontological experience of one's 'true' home constantly deferred" (Maxey, 80). Such a perspective underscores the inherent tension between the desire for stability and the reality of ongoing transience. This tension is exemplified in the character of Harihar, whose aspiration to travel as a Bioscopewalla evolves into a more ambitious dream of directing films. Dreams change, and so does home in dreams. Here, the transformation of Harihar's dream serves as a metaphor for the shifting nature of home; as his professional aspirations change, so does his conceptualisation of home from a transient travel space to a more permanent, creative locus.

Furthermore, Sarah Allen notes that a critical dialectic relationship exists between home and journey for families that experience geographical mobility, such as Harihar and Durga. She observes, "The longer one is away from home, the stronger and more significant the contrast becomes in the dialectical pair" (Allen, 85). This dialectic emphasises that the extended absence from home amplifies the distinctions between the experience of home and the realities of the journey. The interplay between the two constructs a framework where home is not merely a physical location but an evolving concept shaped by the journeys undertaken and the memories formed in transit. In this context, the mental aspect of mobility emerges as

a defining characteristic of survival, influencing individuals' perceptions of identity and belonging. The constant negotiation between the aspirations tied to one's journey and the emotional connection to home illustrates the complex interplay between place, memory, and identity. Thus, the notion of a "deferred home" symbolises the broader existential struggle faced by those who traverse the spaces of their lives, underscoring the psychological nature of displacement that often accompanies physical mobility. The concept of home transcends mere physicality, often symbolising an attempt to reclaim a sense of presence between the habitual frameworks through which individuals perceive their world. For many, such as bus conductors and cab drivers, sleeping in their vehicles often surpasses the experience of resting in a personal home. This reality, however, is not wholly a matter of choice; instead, it reflects the economic necessity compelling them to prioritise their work over their well-being as a means of survival.

In contrast, those fortunate enough to possess a house often forge emotional connections to their dwellings, imbued with a spectrum of sentiments ranging from nostalgia to security. However, as Khair articulates, the materialisation of home, transforming a space into a permanent place, can engender more sorrow than joy. The character of Mangal Singh reflects this sentiment by observing-

> Those were the days when grief must have been a mud hut, […] easily washed away by the floods. Now we make our grief of concrete and cement, steel and iron: we inhabit its empty room (2004, 66).

This lamentation critiques the situation of our modern lives, emphasising permanence and materiality, often resulting in the entrapment of grief within the spaces meant to provide peace and happiness. Khair's exploration of these themes underscores the inherent tension between the longing for stability and the inevitable transience of human experience,

bringing Khair's ideas of home and how it never belongs to poor people. So "Mark Wigley explains in relation to Heidegger's philosophy, the mere occupation of a house … can never be authentic dwelling. Those 'residing' in the home […] are not at home" (Masgrau-Peya and Elisenda 2004, 66). By framing home as a site of emotional attachment and potential anguish, he invites a reconsideration of the values attributed to material possessions and the societal constructs surrounding the idea of home.

The novel shows that dreams are far greater than a home, as dreams and desires drive individuals toward mobility, sometimes at the cost of their familial ties. The portrayal of this state is evident in Harihar's relentless chasing of his dream, where he even abandons his son, who struggles to keep pace behind his father's cart where the boy with "his knees bleeding" where Harihar can see his son's misery but cannot wait for his son: "But he cannot stop" (327). Harihar goes to extreme lengths to sell his son for money and make his wife a mere instrument in his quest for a film studio. These aspirations highlight a disturbing reality in which personal aspirations can take precedence over human relationships. This depiction underscores a harsh critique of the socio-economic forces that compel individuals to sacrifice their loved ones to pursue elusive goals. The narrator's rhetorical questioning in *Filming*— "Who says that inhabitants make a house?"—interrogates the very essence of what constitutes a home. The assertion that home is "a conceit of the human race for their random presence" (165) suggests that the physical space of a house is often divorced from the emotional connections typically associated with it. Instead, the novel highlights that it is the objects within a space, rather than its inhabitants, that give meaning to a house, as the narrator says— "It is not human beings who make a house full and complete; it is the objects that find their way to the house" (165).

The ambiguous conclusion of Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* underscores the contradictory nature of human desire, "Vladimir: well, shall

we go? Estragon: Yes, let's go. They do not move," shows the inability to act hinders the urge to move or to escape. Beckett uses this tension to criticise the modern condition of alienation, where individuals are caught in a perpetual state of waiting, unable to find resolution or stability. As in Khair's and Beckett's world, the notion of home is thus not a place of comfort or certainty. In Monica Ali's Brick Lane, Dr. Azad called this phenomenon of non-belongingness of home an endless deferral 'Going Home Syndrome' (Ali 2007, 24) that encapsulates the enduring sense of dislocation and non-belonging that characterizes the experiences of those living on the margins of society illustrating how the quest for home can become unattainable. Ruth writes how people never find their permanent home while giving references from Victor Fleming's classic film, The Wizard of Oz (1939),

> Once we have left our childhood places […] there is no longer any such place as home: except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz: which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began (Maxey, 2012).

This concept resonates deeply within Khair's works, where the characters' aspirations often perpetuate their alienation, emphasising that dreams, while motivational, can also engender profound disconnection from one's roots.

5.3.3 *National Belongingness and Home*

In his interview, Bhabha emphasises the significance of location, stating, "Location matters, especially when the matter of location involves home or the lack of home" (Riquelme 1998, 541). This assertion highlights the dual role of home as a physical and symbolic space. For citizens, the nation can be perceived as a symbolic home where individuals share a common nationality and identity. Bhabha illustrates this distinction further by noting that "to be unhomed is not to be homeless" (1994, 13). Here, he refers to the condition of being 'unhomed' as one that encompasses "extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations," implying that individuals may

navigate complex cultural aspects while still lacking a sense of belonging. However, the question arises: can all people in India genuinely share the same nationality? This inquiry is critical in a context where economic disparity profoundly impacts one's sense of belonging. Many impoverished individuals in India who lack stable homes experience an acute identity crisis and a sense of non-belongingness, which complicates their relationship with national identity. Ironically, the wealthy often reside in foreign countries and exhibit a robust connection to their nationality, whereas the marginalised, despite their geographical residence in India, frequently feel disconnected from the very essence of national identity.

Khair poignantly illustrates this theme through the historical context of the Partition in his novel. The characters Batin and Lahori are inspired by the real-life figure of Saadat Hasan Manto, who faced forced migration from India to Pakistan. Manto's lament, "[I] did not choose to leave, I chose to live" (358), highlights the profound sense of loss and involuntary displacement. This narrative echoes similar sentiments found in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), where the character Tha'mma is compelled to abandon her ancestral home in Bangladesh due to the repercussions of Partition. When Tha'mma reflects on her first home, she articulates her disorientation: "[s]he does not know the difference between coming and going" (Ghosh, 111). Both Khair and Ghosh highlight the psychological complexities of belonging and the mostly painful realities faced by those navigating the tumultuous national identity amidst historical upheaval. Their works reveal that, for many, the constructs of nationality and home are fraught with contradictions and insecurities as individuals grapple with the paradox of being rooted in a land yet feeling perpetually displaced within its socio-political framework.

Migration is often perceived as a catalyst for development and progress within a country. However, as Singh (1980) notes, "[b]ut population mobility, surprisingly enough, contributes in a large measure to

maladjustment in India" (34). This maladjustment manifests in various forms, particularly in the emergence of violent confrontations between migrants and indigenous populations in different regions of the country. Such conflicts underscore the pressing need for a comprehensive population distribution and national development plan. To harness migration as a vehicle for national development, it is imperative to implement measures promoting social integration, equitable resource distribution, and sustainable economic opportunities for migrants and local communities.

5.4 Conclusion

The chapter illustrates that home is often an illusion for many impoverished individuals in India, serving not as a permanent place but as a transient notion. For many low-income families, the inability to have a permanent home forces them to travel, an essential means of survival and a fundamental aspect of their existence. The harsh realities of poverty compel these individuals to move in search of work and sustenance, often against their will. Moreover, even among those who possess a fixed dwelling, the inability to provide adequate food and resources for their families creates an environment where the home becomes untenable. As such, these individuals navigate a constant state of mobility, leading to a profound identity transgression across various sociocultural and psychological landscapes. This relentless movement reflects their struggle for economic stability, highlighting the complexities of their lived experiences as they confront the challenges of belonging and identity within a society that often marginalises their existence. The interplay between mobility and identity in these narratives underscores the broader socio-economic issues the underprivileged face, revealing how systemic forces shape their realities and perceptions of home.

Khair's narratives disturbingly expose the dire circumstances faced by impoverished rural and regional populations in India, for whom the notion of home is perpetually deferred. In a nation where nationality is

intricately intertwined with cultural identity, the elements of language, religion, and geography play a crucial role in fostering nationalist sentiment. However, these marginalised migrant people, in the absence of a permanent home, find it difficult to connect with national identity. This disconnection underscores the complexities of belonging in a diverse nation like India, where socio-economic status significantly influences one's relationship with the collective identity. As a result, their identities become fragmented, situated outside the dominant frameworks of national belonging, highlighting the utter realities of those on the peripheries of society. Khair's exploration of these themes not only critiques the socio-political structures that contribute to this alienation but also calls attention to the urgent need for inclusivity and recognition of the diverse experiences that shape the national identity in contemporary India.

Displacement fundamentally undermines the rootedness of a nation, mainly when it affects impoverished populations, their homes, and their sense of belonging. Such disruptions pose significant challenges to the cohesion of national identity. For a nation to maintain its integrity as a modern and developed entity, it must remain attuned to the socio-economic realities experienced by its marginalised citizens and continuously prioritise its development. Failure to do so risks the erosion of national identity, as neglect can lead to narratives of dislocation and fragmentation that reflect the myths of time. The vitality of a nation is intrinsically linked to the stability and well-being of its most vulnerable populations; therefore, addressing the impacts of displacement is essential for preserving a cohesive national identity that reflects the diversity and dynamism of its citizens.

In the novels, Manto's narrative serves as a critical lens through which the complexities of national memory, hybridity, and displacement are illuminated. In contrast, the character of Mangal Singh exemplifies the ambivalence of cultural differences experienced by local migrants,

highlighting the nuanced tensions that arise within these interactions. While Bhabha's conceptualisation of borders operates within a national framework, Khair's portrayal of borders is more elusive and regionally specific, reflecting the localised struggles of individuals navigating their identities in a fragmented socio-cultural landscape. Consequently, the third space articulated in Khair's works presents a far more precarious and problematic condition for those inhabiting it than Bhabha's postcolonial third space. Khair's representation of this third space emphasises the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by marginalised groups, revealing how their experiences are marked by a continual negotiation of identity, belonging, and the socio-political dynamics that shape their lives. This critical perspective underscores the limitations of Bhabha's framework when applied to the realities of regional displacement, suggesting that the complexities of identity in Khair's narratives necessitate a reevaluation of the constructs of hybridity and belonging within contemporary postcolonial discourse.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Overview of the Chapters

The section briefly overviews the five chapters mentioned above, followed by research objectives and findings. The first chapter explores Tabish Khair's complete literary works along with his theoretical and critical aspects of postcolonial literature and canon, where Khair emerges as a writer of in-between or hybrid IEL. Khair's literary styles have evolved from traditional popular and literary fiction, taking an intersectional approach to understanding contemporary problems. It then examines how popular/genre/commercial/pulp fiction has been changing in the literary horizon, where many Indian writers' writing in the popular style has completely changed the perspective of fictional writing in India. By investigating the intersectionality of identity and violence, the study probes how Khair's voice matters in contemporary IEL.

The second chapter focuses on Khair's in-between identity as a contemporary Indian English novelist and his place as a writer in the "popular postcolonial fiction" genre, as his writings do not fit neatly into the recognised postcolonial literature. Khair writes about rural and marginalised societies and how people have to go through misery, creating a local niche that resonates internationally. His novels have rural sensibility, new writing styles, and peculiar rural aura, making them different from other contemporary Indian writers. Khair's novels exemplify a complex interplay between popular and literary fiction in postcolonial literature, positioning him as a unique voice within contemporary IEL. He transcends the rigid boundaries of genre classification, demonstrating a fluidity that allows a multifaceted exploration of themes and styles. This chapter argues that Khair's novels exist in a noman's land between these two demarcated genres of postcolonial fiction (literary and popular), creating a genre that this thesis puts in "popular postcolonial fiction." Postcolonial and popular

in terms of Indian English authors are by no means exclusive. However, as a novelist, Khair's tenor does not fit neatly into the recognisable features of postcolonial literature, and his novels are uneasy alongside commercial or popular fiction. This uneasiness creates an in-between space between the postcolonial and the popular that Khair inhabits.

The chapter underscores that Khair's novels, with their intricate narrative style and thematic concerns, do not comfortably place with the conventional features of postcolonial literature, nor can they be easily categorised alongside the works of commercial or popular fiction writers like Chetan Bhagat or Amish Tripathi. Khair's novels challenge simplistic notions of hybridity and postcolonial representation, resisting the reductive tendencies often found in popular fiction, reflecting a deeper exploration of his character's fragmented realities, and critiquing the societal and historical forces that shape them. Khair's creative, stylistic, and thematic preoccupations significantly contribute to contemporary IEL, expanding the boundaries of the genre and challenging conventional literary paradigms. Khair's works interrogate the local and global tensions, often employing a glocal lens that addresses both the distinctive cultural contexts of India and the broader, transnational, postcolonial discourse. His innovative narrative techniques, such as unreliable narrators, fragmented temporal structures, and the integration of intertextual references, allow for a nuanced exploration of the complex intersections between history, memory, and identity.

The third chapter investigates the intersection of systemic violence with broader social tropes such as identity, power and xenophobia in Khair's novels. In the era of high capitalism, xenophobia has transformed into what Tabish Khair terms "new xenophobia" in his book, *The New Xenophobia*, which becomes a ladder for people in power to get more capital and power by utilising the vulnerability of poor people perpetrating systemic violence. Building on this conceptual framework, this chapter

analysed "systemic violence" through Khair's articulation of "new xenophobia," explored in his novels. Systemic violence is perpetuated through various ways in the interplay of economic, social, and political structures that dominate and exploit individuals, creating a form of violence that is difficult to confront or resist, particularly in precarious circumstances. Khair argues that old xenophobia transitions into new xenophobia within power structures where the unequal distribution of power, rather than mere fear of the unfamiliar, becomes the source of violence.

Here, new xenophobia shifts the focus from irrational fear of strangers to the systemic inequities, capital and labour created by uneven economic conditions. While Khair's analysis provides valuable insight into how economic conditions foster new xenophobia and systemic violence, it remains primarily focused on the economic aspects. Therefore, this is the extension and the diversion of Khair's assertion that new xenophobia predominantly prevails in First World countries, particularly in affluent welfare states (2016, 7). Through extensive reading, this study suggests that new xenophobia and its systemic violence are not confined only to first world countries but can manifest in third-world countries, too, particularly India, arguing that while high capitalism certainly contributes to the rise of new xenophobia, it is not the sole factor. Social tropes like religion, caste, race, and language also play critical roles in perpetuating systemic violence through new xenophobia.

Chapter four exemplified the intersection of language and violence by exploring the complex relationship between violence and language in Khair's novels, where language manifests violence through essentialization, objectification, or symbolic narrativization. This violence manifests through the trope of heroism or glorification in various societies, encouraging individuals to perpetrate violence. Such violence often comes with an aesthetic appeal that masks inherent violence when intertwined with

fundamental and radical narratives by normalising and valorising suffering. This narrative framework facilitates a form of hegemonic violence wherein individuals consent to their own suffering under the guise of religious or ideological duty. This exploration highlights the intersection between language and violence, revealing the profound impact of narrativization on the manifestation of personal and collective suffering.

Focusing on the narrativization of violence, this chapter explores how people, in the articulation of identity or self, can serve to justify or legitimize acts of violence because the act of narrating violence involves not only the representation of violent acts but also the cultural and discursive forces that sanction or condemn them, complicating the storytelling process in the legitimation of perpetuation. This chapter concludes that literary tropes employed by the writer to narrate violence from imagination can change into fact as we cannot deny its literal facticity, which can bear violence because of the literary imagination used by writers (Chandra, 3). So, narrating violence from the fictional worlds needs dismantling and deconstructing.

Chapter five examines the concept of home, representation, dislocations and non-belongingness, focusing on the discourses of Indian nationalism and national identity in Khair's novels. It analyses how there is a massive gap between the lifestyles of rural and urban people in India. Many poor people in India do not have a permanent home and constantly migrate from one place to another in search of jobs to survive. They hardly stay in one place, which forces them to make a temporary one-night hut or rent a house, but unfortunately, their journey becomes a permanent home. That makes their existence neither inside nor outside society, creating a different kind of third space, but far more precarious than Bhabha's notion of third space in postcolonial literature. The concept of third space in Khair's novels is far less empowering than Bhabha's. While Bhabha's conceptualisation of borders operates within a national framework, Khair's

portrayal of borders is more elusive and regionally specific. In the international context, movement is frequently a matter of choice, whereas in the intra-national context, particularly in India, it is an imposed necessity. Consequently, the third space articulated in Khair's works is far more problematic than Bhabha's third space, underscoring the limitations of Bhabha's framework when applied to regional displacement. It suggests that Khair's narratives necessitate a reevaluation of the constructs of hybridity and belonging within contemporary postcolonial discourse.

Through the textual analysis of the six primary texts, this thesis demonstrates the intersectionality of identity and violence in Khair's fiction, exemplifying the need to study Khair as an intersectional writer and how his works are relevant to the contemporary world. His works show how IEL can be written globally without the postcolonial emblem. Khair's Novels showcase a remarkable ability to weave wit with gravity, offering critical insights into global and Indian societal structures. His innovative narrative techniques and intertextuality enrich his storytelling, ensuring his works resonate across cultures and epochs. His novels provoke critical reflection on multiculturalism, intersectionality, and the transformative potential of fiction in addressing systemic injustices. It challenges the hegemonic narrative structures and interrogates the politics of race, religion, and migration.

The thesis, therefore, establishes a new trajectory and style of contemporary IEF as Khair's fiction does not fit in the postcolonial and popular literary genres, making a genre of "popular postcolonial fiction," giving a fresh, distinctive voice to IEF. Khair's contributions to IEF solidify his status as an impending literary force on the global stage. This thesis positions Khair as a pivotal figure in IEL whose work provokes critical reflection on identity conflicts, multiculturalism, intersectionality, and the transformative potential of fiction in addressing systemic violence and social injustices. Khair emerges as a significant voice in IEL, skilfully

bridging the genres, making his literary oeuvre not merely reflective but transformative, which will shape the contours of IEL for years to come. This study, therefore, enlarges the scope of IEF. This study makes a critical move to explore the genre of fiction and its intersection in its style and theory. It extends Khair's term "new xenophobia" and how it can perpetrate violence in the Global South, too, particularly in India, by analysing his fictional works. By drawing on interdisciplinary array of thinkers such as Said and Bhabha's postcolonial theory, Slavoj Žižek's conception of symbolic and systematic violence and intersectionality as discussed by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Helma Lutz, the thesis aims to fill a critical gap in existing scholarship, offering a more holistic understanding of Khair's multifaceted engagement with identity, violence, and societal critique.

In his novels, Khair has depicted the other side, less visible in the eyes of metropolitan life of Indian societies focusing on the construction of *Dehati* (rustic) identities of people where he defines violence on the personal and intimate level. In India, compared to other countries, a child comes with not only a literal identity in terms of biological and social but also a more profound symbolic identity in terms of their racial and religious background that leads to more subtle complexities of dealing with social problems which Khair explores aptly through temporal and spatial consciousness of people. Khair targets marginalised tribal women, subalterns, and people experiencing poverty; his text circulates within the vast network of social, political, and cultural aspects and has material consequences for people suffering in Indian societies.

The construction of individual and collective identities in Khair's texts is deeply embedded in the narratives of violence. Ameena's realisation of the societal values taught by people like Hassan underscores the internalisation of oppressive narratives. This phenomenon highlights the critical need for a nuanced understanding of how narratives surrounding sacrifice and martyrdom can distort individual agency, leading to the

endorsement and perpetuation of violent actions within tightly knit communities. Khair adeptly illustrates how detrimental and terrifying the impact of digital spaces can be on vulnerable minds if not checked. Khair's understanding in this thesis proves how diverse cultures and languages often create divisions among people in India. However, the functionality of society still fosters an imagined democratic nation where the notion of 'unity in diversity' becomes possible.

6.2 Tabish Khair: An Unmistakable Contemporary Voice

As Said says, 'location matters', especially the location of writers for their visibility in the literary world. Despite not being tech-savvy or a big shot, Khair has earned his permanent place in the literary world by giving a fresh, distinctive voice to IEL. Diversity politics and marketability of literary otherness are not new topics in academia as they only profited from "the commodification of cultural difference" (*The Postcolonial Exotic*, 12). However, they are very relevant for those writers who get less visibility than celebrated canonical authors. Tabish Khair uses his novels to engage with literary and cultural debates outside this discourse of the publishing sphere. This study examines how Khair, a writer from a marginalised group, displays, questions and sometimes resists these trends in his writings. Khair is one of the writers who come in this category, where his works still need recognition, and his voice must be heard because his approach to writing IEL is glocal, especially for marginalised poor in rural India, without missing the globalised affectation of multicultural spaces.

Indian English novels suffered long because of the alterity industry due to the same themes and writing styles for Western readers. It has, of course, given little credibility to the Indian English novels as Indian writers got few Booker awards, but it took more in terms of authenticity, creativity, and inner voice from Indian writers. This change of writing styles, which is mostly the 'West versus rest' have changed much in terms of writing styles and genres of post-Rushdie fiction, which Pankaj Mishra quips,

'Rushdieitis' and Aijaz Ahmad called commodity fetishisms (Huggan, 2001). Indian exoticism and magical realism became a new genre for most Indian writers for marketability and visibility, making novels a commodity where the face of the writer is more important than writing, causing much harm to the IEF what Dwivedi says, "a sadistic feature of Indian Writing in English which focuses more on the positionality of the author rather than the quality of the work" (2013, 13).

The global literary market is in the West; therefore, writers need to pander to the tastes of global publishing agents and markets. This is precisely the kind of practice that Khair has consistently refused to accept or even legitimise. Dwivedi argues, "It is the very ambiguity of globalisation that has made literature a commodity rather than simply an art; it increases the visibility of writers who are settled in or writing from the centre or metropolitans, …" (2013, 13). Tabish Khair rejected this trend in his writing to show what Indian English writing is and can be in his creative novels. Khair believes stories have been an effective tool of human understanding for humankind for ages, whereas literature has always been an instrument of deeper understanding. The world of story, as Rushdie believes, has the power and capacity to go beyond texts and their contexts by changing the readers' minds, even transforming how they perceive the real world from the fictional world.

Coming from the margins of postcolonial studies, Khair sees stories differently in literature; he argues in *Filming* that "stories are impossible to fence in either time or space" (70); as Yuval Noah Harari pointed out, human beings (Homo Sapiens) are storytelling animals who mostly think in stories than numbers or graphs, emphasizing the importance of stories in human lives since the beginning when there was no book or writing ideas. Tabish Khair perceives religion and literature as two sides of the same coin because both originate from some stories. However, Khair argues, "Literature cannot be conflated with storytelling, as storytelling is related to

the definition of language" (Khair, 2024); as Harari also points out, we do not just tell stories of the present and past that exist and existed, but also of the future that never existed or might never exist. Khair pens his idea of language and its inherent instability, pointing in the book excerpt published online (Khair, 2024) on the newsletters of *Scroll.in*, where he emphasizes that the narrator's version of truth is not necessarily an objective representation of reality, nor is it always possible to access or verify an external, absolute truth.

Additionally, the narrator's use of language —its nuances, context, and intentions— may not align perfectly with the reader's interpretation, even when they ostensibly share the same linguistic framework. This discrepancy underscores the inherent instability of narrative truth and the interpretive gaps shaped by subjectivity and language. Khair argues, "No story or narrative can be accepted as face value. Even a single word cannot be taken for granted across two people, as Chekhov knew" (Khair, 2024). Khair postulates that literature demands an agnostic reading, engaging with the text while considering its context. This approach, often overlooked when literature is reduced to entertainment, politics, or social realism, is essential. Unlike fake news, no matter how fanciful its narrative, literature operates without external verification by events, facts, or divine authority. Reading literature as literature —examining its language, structure, and context— offers a way to navigate and critically assess claims of truth and falsehood in the real world. The story cannot be equated with an event subject to verification as a construct of reality and language. Instead, it must be approached as a narrative in its own right. This requires a form of agnosticism—not a passive ambivalence, but an active, unsettling recognition of the instability of truth in language. Literature teaches us to discern meaning and truth within the text, fostering a nuanced understanding of language's power to shape, distort, or reveal realities. (Khair, 2024).

In his recent non-fictional book, *Literature Against Fundamentalism* (2024), Khair meditates on the complex problems of our contemporary world, fundamentalism and its residues leading to war, crime and unhealthy living in societies. Every complex question cannot have one fixed single answer. Because there will be no room for other opinions, doubts and tolerance for 'alternative perspectives.' That will be a world of fundamentalism. Khair gives a bold but apt statement in this book by arguing that literature is the ultimate counterweight to fundamentalist thinking. Because where fundamentalism discourages dialogue, literature sparks it, as literature is the oldest thinking device known to humankind. We live in a compartmentalised and polarised society where people live in their own safe little rooms. Syed Zubair Ahmed says,

> We are living in a time when fundamentalists appear to have a firm hold on our narratives. This is where our man from Gaya enters. Tabish dares to urge us to forget the political differences and ideological clashes and find time to read literature (Ahmad, 2024).

The interpretation of religion or religious texts is an example of people not wanting to listen to other perspectives. Here, Khair gives his understanding and an antidote for such rigid texts: literature. Khair sees literature as an answer to extremism in this fundamentalist world because literature provides new insights apart from aesthetics and morality. Literature does not provide alternative answers or morals, but literature teaches and invokes a certain mentality, leading to deeper thinking and contemplation. As a creative writer, Khair believes a pen is mightier than a sword. In *The Bravado of Books*, he argues,

> The sword—unlike the pen—can only cut and slice. The pen can form words, pluck them from thick air. These words can cut and slice too, of course, as anyone who has had a relationship go sour usually discovers. … The word has a soul: its present is always linked to a past and a future *as a word* (Nasta et al., 2019).

However, Khair presses on the difference of might between the pen and the sword, arguing that while the pen is not mightier than the sword, it is far more elusive and enduring. The power of literature lies in its understanding that words are fluid, shaped by their past and future. Unlike the sword, the word imbued with this knowledge can wield transformative might. As a novelist, Khair crafts his narrative structure to present and simultaneously hide implied meaning by leaving some clues and points for readers to venture into their own intellectual journey to read the texts in their own ways. Khair always leaves some gaps and silences in his novels to excavate those hidden or implied meanings for readers, as words cannot say everything; here comes the importance of literature; it excavates the meaning because literature makes us think, which language struggles to do. If art enables contemplation, then literature enables us to have deep contemplation.

Despite a comprehensive exploration of the intersectionality between identity and violence in the four major chapters, this study accordingly presents certain limitations beyond the scope of the current dissertation. These limitations, however, offer possible paths for future work. In the second chapter, the investigation of Khair's intersectional identity, situating him in the genre of "popular postcolonial fiction," has been explored exclusively by investigating Khair's literary works. While this approach capitulates Khair's peculiar writing style, it does not encompass the other writers of Indian writers who might fit into this liminal genre and postcolonial discourse. Expanding the corpus to include a wider range of such hybrid writers could offer a more nuanced understanding of this literary category. This limitation restricts the universality of the study's conclusions regarding the emergence and characteristics of such hybrid postcolonial authorship.

Similarly, the third chapter addresses the case of new xenophobia primarily explored through Khair's texts, analysing the complex social

tropes such as religion, caste, class, language, and ethnicity. However, this study predominantly foregrounds the intersection of religion, race and xenophobia, with limited engagement with other critical dimensions, particularly the roles of capitalism and the structural dynamics of the Indian social order complicit in intensifying the other exclusionary practices. A more nuanced analysis incorporating other important Indian social markers, particularly caste and language, as represented in the works of many writers, might show that an emergent form of new xenophobia is even more pervasive and dangerous in contemporary Indian society.

The narrativisation of violence examined in the fourth chapter is primarily based on Khair's selected works, which explore how language can serve as a vehicle for perpetrating systemic violence when narrated in different contexts. However, this focused analysis provides valuable insight into the relationship between different narrativisation and violence in Khair's novels; it inevitably limits the larger relevance of its conclusions to the broader outlook of IEF. Consequently, the study does not account for how other Indian novelists might engage with similar themes through distinct narrative techniques. Moreover, this chapter primarily focuses on three principal analytical lenses, glorification, thingification, and symbolic narrativisation, to interrogate how such violence is perpetrated through narrative forms. While these frameworks offer a compelling entry point to understand the systemic violence of language, they do not exhaust the range of possible critical approaches. Other theoretical frameworks like trauma studies, affect theory, or post-humanist critique may show alternative insights into the complex interplay between language, narrative and violence, which currently lie beyond this study's scope but might be used as further scholarly exploration.

In the fifth chapter, Khair's conception of the third space is more precarious and complicated than Bhabha's third space in the postcolonial studies. However, this analysis remains inherently limited by its focus on a

single novelist. While Khair's understanding of home and belongingness offers fruitful insights into the dynamics of postcolonial hybridity and marginality, it does not address the potentially more intricate and layered representation of the third pace found in the works of other writers, who particularly engage with the lived experiences of Dalit or transgender communities. Such voices often construct more radical and multi-layered versions of third space. These authors may constrict the third spaces marked by deeper entanglements of socio-cultural and political exclusion, affective dislocation, and structural violence experiences in postcolonial and intersectional contexts. These aspects lie beyond the scope of this study.

While this dissertation offers a comprehensive analysis of Khair's selected fiction through the thematic prisms of identity and violence, it acknowledges the inherent limitations of a single-author study. The narrow corpus restricts the magnitude of postcolonial and intersectional understanding that might be derived from a more diverse selection of literary voices. Nevertheless, these limitations open up fruitful avenues for future research, particularly comparative, interdisciplinary, and intersectional studies that engage a wider range of voices, genres, and diverse locations within IEF and postcolonial literature that incorporate a wider range of authors and social positionalities.

APPENDIX

Literature and thinking about the world in the post-pandemic era: An interview with Tabish Khair

This interview resulted from Khair's "Literature and Thinking About the World" lecture on December 8, 2022, at the Indian Institute of Technology [IIT], Indore, India. It is mainly focused on Khair's recent books, *The Body by the Shore* (2022), *Literature Against Fundamentalism* (2024), and other essential works. In the present interview, Khair discusses how he perceives the post-pandemic world in *The Body by the Shore* and reflects on his oeuvre in an era defined by rampant capitalism and pervasive, systemic violence, in which the role of literature becomes increasingly vital. Khair says literature is not merely an artistic endeavour but a necessary intervention, encouraging introspection and resistance in a world increasingly driven by consumption and conflict. Through this interview, Khair emerges as a writer and a cosmopolitan intellectual, rooted in the ethos of rural India yet navigating the complexities of global metropolises, exposing the fractures in dominant discourses and inviting a reimagining of literature's role in resisting homogenization and commodification.

Ramesh Kumar Mahtha (RKM): *The Body by the Shore* is about the friction between inhabitants and immigrants. This extends the focus of your earlier novel, *Jihadi Jane* (2016a), which deals with immigration, language problems and xenophobia. Can you highlight why this friction exists?

Tabish Khair (TK): It is interesting, and perhaps convenient for me, that you use a word like "friction", which carries little or no political surcharge yet. Because, honestly, life is friction. Actually, one can say that friction is a condition of biological life: organic life is responsive to its environment, and surely this means "friction" in a broad sense? Social life increases this friction further, and social life based on abstract language makes the

possibilities explode. That is why I said that it is convenient for me that you used a word like "friction" with no linguistic tug-of-war around it, unlike the synonyms that you might have used, like "conflict", "alienation", "struggle", and so on. Belonging as we do to a species with abstract language, the possibilities of "friction" – understanding, defining, negotiating friction – simply explode. How does one deal with it? That has always been one of my core concerns. If, shall we say, "friction" is a condition of life, how does one make the most of it? Like all Indian English writers, I was born into an affluent family, but, luckily, not into the kind of privilege or entitled social vacuum that would make me privilege "friction" – or its synonyms, such as fight, conflict, violence, dominance, resentment, even some vaguely realized notion of revolt or revolution, and so on – as a good in itself. Even in my initially more Marxist years, I thought that most people have much more to lose than their chains in the case of a revolution, and I do not fully trust the judgement or vision of a few people – either very privileged or very deprived – who have nothing to lose. So, to answer your question, friction is inevitable in life, but it can be negotiated in different ways, and not all ways – not all fights – are necessarily good ones. I am not at all convinced of the validity of a "fight" that consists, for instance, of covering yourself head to foot in a shroud in the name of religion or claiming that plastic surgery was invented in India because, look, aha, we have Lord Ganesha.

RKM: Mobility is not the same for all classes of people. Are the migrants' decisions to "stay" or "return" as simplistic as Jens Erik, the xenophobic protagonist in *The Body by the Shore*, believes in the novel? What is more important in today's globalised world, routes or roots?

TK: I loved creating Jens Erik. He has a limited view of the world, but then he has lived in a narrow strip of it. (I think all of us have more or less limited views of the world in any case!). He also has personal flaws, like every human being. Some of what he thinks about immigrants' shades towards

xenophobia, may even be racism. And yet, he stresses some aspects of the reverse position, which, I believe, tend to be forgotten by people like me who have moved too much and can move with relative ease. My father, a small-town doctor, was not like me there: he disliked moving, and never voluntarily left even his small town in Bihar. Surely, in our justified celebration of the right of people to move, we should not forget or reduce the right of people to stay? I think that the "routes and roots" division largely launched by cosmopolitan writers and academics of the Rushdie generation – and which, I confess, I too have used in the past – is seriously misleading if seen as a binary. Routes come from somewhere and go somewhere. In that sense, routes root a place to another place. Roots connect not just, say, trees to earth (and hence to a different thing altogether) but also often form networks that sustain other trees, sometimes through networks of fungi, which are not plants. Moreover, roots carry traffic of nutrients, water, and so on. In those senses, roots are routes too. For a long time, I have been wondering if the privileging of mobility by people who, by choice or circumstances, had to move is not just as limited and blind as the prior privileging of stasis by those who, from choice or circumstances, had to stay in one place, cultivating the same land or speaking just one language.

The world we live in, the world of neo-liberal capitalism, is sadly not about need. It is about power, wealth, and privilege. People mostly do not get what they need. They get what they have the wealth and power to grab. This is so much part of our ideology now that few people even question it. We justify it in different ways or look away. That is what I was depicting.

RKM: In the novel, Vijay Nair says that the harm caused by so-called intelligent people will "[a]lways outweigh the good unless […] every one of them has an equal share in the good" (Khair 2022, 197). Is this attainable? And how can someone expect an equal share of good from everyone when people like Harris, Mermaid, Kathy and all such people

are cold-blooded killers who believe: "Fuck the ideas, the reasons, the excuses" (213)?

TK: One cannot expect it, true. But one does not stop pointing out the need for something that one does not expect, especially if, as the novel suggests, a failure to address such a need is a sure recipe for ultimate annihilation. People babble about AI today, as once they used to babble about machines. Politicians continue to babble about growth and development. There is nothing wrong with any of it per se; what is wrong goes further back. These things, from machines to AI, from growth to development, will lead to a spiral of environmental and civilizational devastation unless we can address what Nair notes: the fact that people do not get an equal share in the good. The Elon Musks of the world can fool themselves and us into believing that we can, like locusts, just leave this planet for another. But even if it can happen for Mr Musk, it won't happen for the majority, and it will leave a devastated planet. How come we seem to believe that living on Mars is "attainable", but giving every human being on earth a decent chance at life is not attainable? That is the question.

RKM: The character of Michael, investing billions in his secret project, believes that "[b]y controlling the 'microbe', we can control every single human response in the world!" (2022, 256). Do you see science's future as regress rather than progress? Are we the people in the wrong place at the wrong time, as the character of Harris believes?

TK: I have never blamed science for anything. I have blamed those who use science for selfish, oppressive, and myopic purposes. That is the issue. Vijay Nair, initially a scientist in the novel, suggests as much when he notes that the "good" must be shared. That is not what has been happening. Scientists do science as writers do literature or artists do art: there might be some desire for money or fame, but finally, there is a passion that carries them forward. What scientists enable can be used for so many things, but mostly, it is used to make money. This is not just a private matter but an

organisational one in which the richest corporations and the most powerful politicians are equally complicit. That is the problem. Not science. Remember, there are vague and powerful financiers behind Michael.

RKM: Do you think speculative fiction is the true picture of society? Throughout the novel, there is a sense of an apocalyptic future; why so much pessimism?

TK: There is no one picture of society – it is too wide, varied and changing. Speculative fiction helps address some matters quite well. But there are other kinds of fiction – and poetry and plays and non-fiction – for other, and sometimes even the same, aspects. When it comes to pessimism, I suppose I watch the news too often.

RKM: This age of digital culture and AI seems contradictory because people appear to be connected to the whole world, but digital culture has also created divisions between families, friends, and communities. In *The Body by the Shore* (2022), the robot dog has replaced the human cop, and the future looks terrible and dark as people plan to colonise Mars (68). Do you believe that humanity, as a whole, needs to be redefined?

TK: AI is doing to people exactly what machines and then robots did. It is not new. Centuries ago, we failed to ensure that much, if not all, of the profits accrued from machines would be ploughed back into society and people. The Luddites protested, and history painted them as socio-political Neanderthals. The same failure is being repeated. But this time, its consequences will be deeper. I don't blame Artificial Intelligence; I blame the fact that human greed and selfishness continue to blinker our natural intelligence.

RKM: In *The New Xenophobia* (2016b), you say contemporary forms of xenophobia work more vigorously in countries located in the Global

North than in the Global South. Instead of focusing on capitalism, do you think your statement might change if we focus on other social factors, like caste and religion, in a country like India?

TK: The purpose of that book was to look at what changing structures of power do to xenophobia. Or, in other words, to examine this problem: if strangers need to be defined and, to an extent, created before they can be persecuted, and if power is what is always at play in this matrix, then what happens if the structure and sources and representations of power change? In a more specific manner, I wanted to see what might happen with xenophobia if power, which has been largely expressed through and invested in capital as money (coins, cash, vouchers, and so on), suddenly does not need money to circulate. This has been a growing fact since the 1990s. Historically, we have moved from the use of precious objects or objects invested with value (such as cowrie shells or gold) to various kinds of embodied money (from gold coins to paper notes), and now, for the first time, much of the capital in circulation does not exist as gold, silver, coins, or paper money. I argued that this would create new kinds of xenophobia and new kinds of justification for xenophobia. But this does not mean that the old forms would disappear, especially not in countries where power still has a dominant physical mode, such as gold, paper money, and so on.

Moreover, the origins of caste and religion predate even the rise of universal currencies, such as gold coins or, later, paper money. They come with certain, shall we say, traditions of xenophobia located in the physical marking or demarcation of the "stranger". These will not disappear. But the rationale behind them might change. Older forms of xenophobia will continue to operate as the physical base of power never fully disappears: one can always lynch a person for breaking some taboo. No amount of high capital is going to change that. But the justification behind the lynching can and does change; it might now be given in terms of economic performativity or even human or animal rights.

RKM: Pernille asked her father, Jens Erik, "Are you sure, far [Danish for father], that you have never discriminated between the crimes to solve, the complaints to follow up" (2022, 83) that are based on colour or ethnicity? I think it isn't straightforward. Can someone be sure they are not discriminating against someone, especially migrants or others? Is it possible to be friendly with such people without judging them as Jens Erik does? And if it is, why do we need to discuss this topic?

TK: Yes, good points. That is why I like Jens Erik. The question makes him think. I am more afraid of people who feel that they have no prejudices at all. They are not people who want to think. We live in a world filled with people who are being taught not to think. It is frightening. And it makes me pessimistic too, like the news.

RKM: In *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012a) we are told that Ravi "[m]ade no promise of fidelity, that he actually promised infidelity and impermanence. I am a postmodern lover, he would clarify; you bastards are still stuck knee-deep in modernity" (21). What is the importance of postmodernism in contemporary literature, and how has postmodernism affected your writing?

TK: This is a difficult question to answer, as it involves a certain understanding of postmodernism and poststructuralism and their links. In my view, one cannot understand postmodernism without understanding poststructuralism. Put simply and simplistically, modernism and structuralism were based on the realisation that all meanings, all words, and all definitions are inevitably frayed, contested, and contextual. But postmodernism and poststructuralism went further than that by locating the contestation and contextuality not in the operation of language in the world but in the language itself. They made even the possibility of meaning evaporate to a large extent, and this was considered a good thing: it was all play on the surface of language now. Hence, from a constant critique of

meaning, which is what modernism and structuralism mostly did, we moved to a kind of impossibility of meaning, an endless play of meaning in postmodernism. For me, this is a problematic trajectory.

There are various reasons for this. It would need a book to explicate them. But let me add that Ravi, despite being a lovely person, is not an infallible character in that novel. I suggest that with all his strengths and his intelligence, he is nevertheless both privileged and limited by his socio-economic privileges. The way his love story ends suggests that too. But to return to postmodernism, I believe that one cannot ignore or dismiss its perceptions, though one need not accept its basic positions either. Like Ravi, I feel that a lot of postmodernism comes from a position of vast privilege: from that safe position, one can afford to engage in an endless play of meanings, as one can avoid suffering from the physical consequences of such play. However, the one thing that I have still learnt from postmodernism, despite my essential skepticism of its ontology, is this: the writer has to be aware of, and make the reader aware of, his/her presence in any work of literature or art. The innocence of transparency was a myth, and we cannot and should not return to it.

RKM: A line from *The Thing About Thugs* (2010) goes, "[I] write from between texts and spaces, even though I am located in the space of their narration and they in mine" (5). You have also talked about how any text needs close reading to excavate these gaps and silences; otherwise, it will be a kind of death of the reader. How do you see this relationship between writers and readers in terms of superiority in Indian contexts where most people can't read English literature properly? In such a case, can we expect excavations, and will it not take them to the death of the reader?

TK: Let's be brutally honest about this. All literature should be written, and a large chunk of it read, in one's first language. I am not saying "mother tongue", which is a weird notion and weirder in today's multilingual world.

But first language, and, in my case (given the fact that I know Hindi and Urdu, but their political conflicts alienated me from both until it was too late), my first language is English. That is why I write in English, not in Hindi, Urdu or Danish. So, unfortunately, I also write for people whose first language is English. Not necessarily their mother tongue, if they have one, and many people do not, but their first language. So, the excavations that I am talking about relate to these readers whose first language is English. I do not expect anything from anyone else. Given this first language bridge, neither the reader nor the writer is superior: it is always a negotiation, a walking towards one another. The postmodernist fallacy that readers can make their own meaning is as nonsensical as the traditionalist fallacy that readers must read the writer's intention and nothing else. Both are based not just on a deficient understanding of literature but also on a deficient understanding of language.

RKM: In many of your talks, you resist being called a postcolonial writer; however, postcolonial theory examines migration, alienation, and diasporic experiences, which almost all your novels explore. What is the reason for your resistance? Are you not contradicting yourself in your writing, and why?

TK: I feel that the term "postcolonial" reduces me both as a writer and as an Indian, for in both capacities, there is much that goes beyond the (European) colonial bridge. Also, when I started off, it was fashionable for writers of colour to put the feather of "postcolonialism" in their hats, and I am suspicious of fashions.

RKM: Your academic work, *Babu Fictions* (2001), explores alienation in contemporary Indian English Fiction (IEF). You have explored the issue of power and discourse by focusing on the tension of narration (through caste, class, and gender) in IEF because of the dual positioning

of Babu fiction. How do you see the narrativization of violence in IEF, and how does it affect IEF in contemporary Indian literature?

TK: Physical violence is always difficult to narrate, especially for individuals and in classes that have very little experience of it. Of course, there are other kinds of violence, too, because physical violence is not the only version. One of the kinds of violence that I, as a writer of IEF, have been very sensitive to, is the violence of making people who speak other Indian languages talk in a certain way in English in my novels. I suppose, in my view, any writer of IEF who is not aware of this violence that we can commit as writers on our characters is unlikely to engage with any other kind of violence out there outside the book, so to speak, with a large degree of perception.

RKM: In *Babu Fictions*, you have addressed IEF without trying to fit into a "postcolonial mould" by examining writers Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, and Amitav Ghosh. I think these writers are literary giants or representative writers in postcolonial literature; how do you categorise their writings, and do you still have the same resistance from Babu fictions?

TK: I had used "Babu" as a red flag, and also because I did not find terms like "bourgeoisie" to be sufficient. The idea was not to dismiss the writing but to examine how significant writers of IEF have tackled the problem of writing in English about a country where most people do not converse in English, or not all the time in any case. This examination was largely lacking then. It is still not too common. One is either dismissed for writing in English or celebrated for writing in English: both are simplistic positions that ignore the arts, devices, options, and choices that make literature. I am myself, by my definition, a Babu of a sort. No Indian, who is not a Babu, writes in English or reads for leisure in English.

RKM: In *Babu Fictions,* while focusing on the issue related to Ghosh's work, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), you argued that some of the most valorized and "Bookered" achievements in current IEF are much more problematic and hegemonic than literature that is conscious of depths of discursive and linguistic alienation – and of cultural otherness as neither completely inscrutable nor readily transparent. Please throw light on this issue.

TK: This has not changed and will not change as long as we – and this includes all internationally visible Indian English writers and critics – continue to locate our lodestones of critical acclamation in London or New York. It is as lopsided and self-limiting to derive our accolades from such culturally distanced places as it would be to make Delhi or Mumbai the centre of critical appreciation for American or British fiction. What gets privileged is often, though not always, writing that appeals to people at the centre, who have the privilege, and others who share those values and lifestyles. It is not bad writing, but a certain kind of good writing. Other kinds of good writing just do not get the attention of the king-and-queen-makers in London or New York, whether it is the *Guardian* or the *Spectator* or *New York Times*. This is inevitable.

RKM: It would probably be correct to call you a writer of "self-imposed exile" as you were not forced to flee or leave this country. How do you describe yourself as a writer of exile, and what is your take on the theme of mobility, as most of your novels deal with this? In your own experience, how did this migration and diaspora affect your writing?

TK: I find it difficult to relate to the word "exile". There are two reasons for it. First, I am not an exile because, as you mention, I can always return. Second, I have always felt that I belong and do not belong – both in Denmark and in India. Everywhere. I suppose, in order to be a writer, you have to both belong and not belong, no matter where you were or are. The

idea of "exile" seems to simplify this matter unless, of course, you are a political exile, which I am not. I am not a great champion of either mobility (diaspora and so on) or stasis (staying home and so on): I think both are essential parts of human existence, and everyone has a slightly different relationship to either of them. No point in championing one over the other. Obviously, your experience influences, even determines, your writing: I am sure I would have been a different writer if I had not moved to Denmark or if I had moved to the USA instead. But I think I would still have had this feeling of both belonging and not belonging.

RKM: How do you see time and space in your writings? Your novels have different settings that comprise places like India, England, Denmark, and Syria, but one place, "Phansa", a fictional cosmopolitan rural space from Bihar in India, is connected to all your works. What does that mean to you: a root, a string, or an imaginary homeland?

TK: Yes, in the sense that Phansa remains a tethering post. I would not call it a root or an imaginary homeland; I prefer your choice of "string". But it is not just a string orienting or defining my gyrations as a writer. It is as much a string orienting or circumscribing the reader: with Phansa there, the reader knows what relationship my space of origin has to other spaces. Also, Phansa enables me to stress the cosmopolitanism of small places too, and that is a necessary endeavour in my writing, more so as writing in English means that I will often be read in metropolitan spaces where people seem to think that they have a monopoly on cosmopolitanism. Phansa is the point that orients the movement of my narrative in other spaces at times, and it serves as an index for the reader, or at least the reader who notices. It does not tie me down, but it orients me.

RKM: You have argued that "the Muslim is often pictured by dominant post-9/11 discourse as a Vampire" (Höglund and Khair 2013, 8). In *The Body by the Shore* (2022), you write that, before the Covid-19

pandemic, Muslims were the major threat to world peace, but after the pandemic, this threat changed to the virus: "[M]uslims had been replaced by a virus as the global villain […] though with similar effects" (37). So, my question is, how are Muslims perceived today? How do you see Islamic fundamentalism in the post-pandemic world?

TK: Much of what I have written about this has been determined by who I was writing for given the language I write in: largely anglophone, and hence largely western and non-Muslim readerships. And in that context, obviously, there are many prejudices about Muslims. But if I were to speak to a non-Westernised Muslim readership, I would also stress that some of these prejudices, if not all, are rooted in real and continuing political failures on the part of Muslim leaders, political and religious. I would say that just as many in the non-Muslim world show a failure of imagination and empathy when it comes to dealing with Muslims, many in the Muslim world also show a failure of imagination and empathy when it comes to dealing with the non-Muslim. Regarding Islamic fundamentalism, I suspect that, like all religions and other kinds of fundamentalism, it is likely to survive in a world where most people prefer comfort to questions and seem to be losing the ability and/or time to think deeply.

RKM: Why is it important to press the limitations of language in literature?

TK: It's a question that can be answered at different levels. Most people do not want to press their limitations. Much of the comfort in life is based on not pressing your limitations. And unfortunately, that also leads to, I would say, a less satisfying life when we do need to press our limitations to some extent, not to what extent. Do we want to press them? That is up to us. But, I think, when it comes to writing literature, you need to press your limitations as much as possible because you need to work with two things as a writer. You have to work with your strengths, of course, but you have to work with your weaknesses and find a way around them.

RKM: Your writings address contemporary issues in our society. So, as a social critic or, as dubbed by other scholars, a humanist, do you think that the aspects of society that you would like to write about are still left untouched by other writers?

TK: Oh yes. Probably many aspects. Writers, after all, come from certain classes. They write best about experiences they can relate to and comprehend, and hence usually leave out certain other experiences. But then, literature, at its best, is not just a portrait of society. It does something else, while etching a portrait: it speaks between the lines, or in the gaps. And in that sense, it sometimes manages to go beyond the experiences or opinions of its writers too.

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